

STILL A SMALL VOICE:  
TOWARD AN AMERICAN-JEWISH POETRY

By

RICHARD S. CHESS

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<u>page</u>
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	iii
ABSTRACT.....	viii
CHAPTERS	
1    STILL A SMALL VOICE.....	1
Notes.....	39
2    KARL SHAPIRO'S FRONTAL ATTACK .....	42
Notes.....	88
3    DAVID IGNATOW: THE REFUSE MAN.....	92
Notes.....	121
4    PHILIP LEVINE'S TURNING.....	122
Notes.....	153
5    TOWARD AN AMERICAN-JEWISH POETRY.....	155
Notes.....	162
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	163
BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH.....	169

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By

Richard S. Chess

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When the history of twentieth-century American poetry is written, literary historians will have to take into account the proliferation of American-Jewish poetry. Like American-Jewish life in the twentieth-century, American-Jewish poetry is predominantly secular in nature. The particularly Jewish issues which concern many American-Jewish poets include the threat of anti-Semitism, the chauvinistic belief in Jewish exclusivity, and the weakening ties to their Jewish familial pasts. While few American-Jewish poets choose to write overtly of their experiences as Jews, many write of experiences that clearly exhibit the presence of a Jewish consciousness. The precise and individualistic nature of a poet's Jewish consciousness is often determined largely by his or her childhood Jewish

experiences. Few American-Jewish poets have chosen to advance their understanding of Jewish experience through their adult years. Through the works of Karl Shapiro, David Ignatow and Philip Levine, three important twentieth-century American-Jewish poets, we can identify some of the ways in which Jewish experience continues to inform the poetry of American-Jewish poets, even when those poets appear to be fully assimilated into American life.

## CHAPTER 1 STILL A SMALL VOICE

If one bases his judgment on the evidence of modern and contemporary American poetry, he might easily conclude that the assimilation of Jews into American culture has been an astounding success, even from the earliest days of the twentieth century. Jewish literary critics, anxious to characterize a distinctive Jewish voice in American poetry, often attribute the failures of American-Jewish poetry to its apparent assimilated nature. In "The Sorrows of American-Jewish Poetry," a touchstone essay on the subject, Harold Bloom concludes,

though it causes me real grief to say this, the achievement of American-Jewish poets down to the present moment remains a modest and mixed one. There are no Bellows or Malamuds among them, though there are a few signs that this melancholy estimate may need to be revised upward.<sup>1</sup>

Twenty years later, in a 1988 review essay of three recent translations of Yiddish-American poetry, Bloom does revise his estimate upward, though the passage of poetry he cites as illustrative of American-Jewish poetry still suggests the vacuity of American Jewry.

Oh  
We shall carry it [a candle] set  
Down inside a pitcher

Out into the field, late  
Wonderers errant in  
Among the rich flowers.

Like a star reflected  
In a cup of water,  
It will light up no path:

Neither will it go out.<sup>2</sup>

As Bloom informs us, this passage from John Hollander's "Spectral Emanations" alludes to a custom carried on by villagers in Northern Portugal who, as late as the 1920s, still lighted candles in pitchers on Friday nights without knowing why, except that it was an old family custom; these were unknowing Marranos, Jews whose ancestors had undergone forced conversion at the time of the Spanish Inquisition. Bloom sees in the passage "a tragic metaphor for what yet could become the American-Jewish relation to an ancient tradition" and asks, "Does a candle that lights up no path still matter, even if it will not go out?"<sup>3</sup> Many American Jews of Bloom's generation, in fact, find themselves in a situation similar to that of the Marranos alluded to here: they continue to perform the rituals their grandparents or great-grandparents brought with them from, say, eastern Europe, though they no longer understand the significance of these rituals.

Bloom's dim assessment of the state of American-Jewish poetry is echoed by Herbert Levine, a younger critic, who concludes that "most American-Jewish writers . . . write in a non-Jewish language and do not know the Jewish meanings they are unable to convey."<sup>4</sup> As Levine sees it, most American-Jewish poets have lost all ties to the ancient tradition: they can no longer even perform the meaningless ritual (or write in a Jewish language, by which he must mean Yiddish or Hebrew) which would establish at least a weak connection to their past. Levine even goes so far as to challenge the validity of a literary study of American-Jewish poetry. "I would contend that the hyphenated term, American-Jewish writer, is only meaningful as a sociological distinction, and not as a literary historical one" (HL, 23).

While Bloom is more positive than Levine about the state of American-Jewish poetry, both men share a belief that a true Jewish poetry, whatever its national identity, must be composed from within a covenantal framework. After all, historically it has been allegiance to the covenant that has defined the community of Jews. Bloom concludes his essay of sorrow by observing that, "[t]here is no recovery of covenant, of the Law, without confronting again, in all deep tribulation, the God of the Fathers, Who is beyond image as He is beyond personality, and Who can be met only by somehow again walking His Way. For all our mutual deep skepticisms, the increasing enterprise of American-Jewish

poetry is what it must be: the persistence in seeking to recover what once our ancestors had" (SAJP, 262). Though Levine wisely rejects Bloom's prescription as nostalgic, he too calls for the surrender of individual expression in favor of a communal vision, calls, in fact, for a renewed confrontation with the divine. "The work of the Jewish people is to create its own collective liturgy, its own prophecy, its own destiny. American-Jewish poets can join in the work, but only after they drop their hyphens" (HL, 27).

The position of Bloom and Levine is arrogantly narrow-minded. Jews have been writing and publishing serious poetry in America for at least 100 years. It is true that during this time there has yet to emerge a substantial body of poetry that could be pointed to and identified as exclusively Jewish. But we should not expect such a thing, for the Jewish experience in the diaspora has not been characterized by isolation, but integration. Neither has it been characterized by a direct confrontation with the covenant. Indeed, the experience of many twentieth-century American Jews has been secular, not religious. Even members of the Reform movement, which constitutes a significant proportion of American Jewry, lead lives which according to rabbinical standards would be considered secular. Thus, the articulation of a secular American-Jewish identity in a poem must be considered an authentic representation of the

American-Jewish experience. Furthermore, any reasonable reader should expect to find certain features of an American-Jewish poem which indeed represent the particular Jewish experience of its author along with features reflecting a multiplicity of other influences.

Nonetheless, I cannot help but share in the disappointment of Bloom and Levine that when regarded from an exclusively Jewish point of view, the poetry of American Jews fails on many counts. For one thing, despite the quantity of poetry published by American-Jewish poets, relatively few poems address explicitly Jewish subjects. The occasional Jewish poem one does stumble upon, often with surprise ("I didn't know he was Jewish!"), is more than likely characterized by an absence of passion or conviction, especially when compared with the poet's other work. A portrait of a grandparent, an anecdote of an encounter between an old-world father and a new-world son, a reminder of the Holocaust--these are some of the few Jewish subjects commonly treated by the American-Jewish poet. The lackluster performance in many of these poems, which seem primarily motivated by nostalgia or guilt, is, finally, indicative of the poet's ambivalence toward his or her Jewish heritage, religious or secular.

But what about the other poems, the poems that apparently have little to do with Jewish life? Can we, upon close examination, uncover a Jewish consciousness, or a

consciousness which is in part shaped by Jewish cultural experience, informing these poems? I believe so, and through an investigation of the poetry of three American poets, Karl Shapiro, David Ignatow and Philip Levine I hope to demonstrate this.

Each of these poets, as is true of virtually every mainstream American-Jewish poet, views himself as operating outside of the narrowly circumscribed congregation of Jews. Nonetheless, each retains the often nagging consciousness of a Jew. Though under most circumstances the poet writes with little apparent regard to this feature of his or her psychic makeup, it may at all times be operative, influencing the poet's work in ways he may not detect. On other occasions, stimulated by some outside force--a historical event, a personal brush with anti-Semitism, a death in the family, etc.--the Jewish component may rise to the front of his consciousness, demanding the poet's full attention.

The articulation of a Jewish consciousness in modern and contemporary poetry reflects an individualistic response to Jewish life. Consequently, "one must always attend to the particular ways in which Jewish experience impinges on the individual, and this impingement is bound to differ in small things and large from one writer to the next," according to the wise scholar and critic Robert Alter.<sup>5</sup> While Alter's notion may seem antithetical to what some regard as the fundamentally communal nature of Jewish life,

his method of reading takes into account the dynamics of Jewishness interacting with serious modern and contemporary literature. Following Alter's lead then, I will not search for behavioral or attitudinal characteristics of the Jews as represented in the poems of Shapiro, Ignatow and Levine. Instead, I will identify the characteristic expression of a Jew in each poet's work. Shapiro himself in fact underscores the individualistic nature of Jewish life in the twentieth century, and hence the validity of this approach, by entitling his selected poems, Poems of a Jew.

As the American-Jewish poet steps outside of the Jewish community, in its place he may enter the temple of aesthetics. In fact, Jewish literary critics complain that the American-Jewish poet replaces an allegiance to God with an allegiance to aesthetic principles. Bloom expresses this when he observes that "All post-Enlightenment poetry in English tends to be a displaced Protestantism . . . , so that the faith in a Person easily enough is displaced into an initial devotion to the god-like precursor poet. This," he continues, "to underestimate it, is hardly a very Jewish process, and yet something like it seems necessary if poets are to continue to be incarnated" (SAJP, 253). Bloom labels the process "the pragmatic religion-of-poetry."

Cynthia Ozick distinguishes between a Jewish and Gentile relation to art in a personal confession. "Until

very recently, my whole life was given over to the religion of Art, which is the religion of the Gentile nations. . . . "<sup>6</sup> The whole interest in form and formal criticism, an objectifying of the literary text, elevating the literary text to the status of idol, according to Ozick, derives from Greek culture, not Jewish, and is finally antithetical to Jewish values. What Ozick proposes is a Jewish Diaspora literature which, though not necessarily religious, is written from within the framework of the covenant in that it does not seek to replace God with a literary text and in that its interest is more in the gristle of human reality than in the perfection of literary form.

Herbert Levine, too, who is more committed to the practice of a Jewish lifestyle and more knowledgeable about traditional Judaism than Bloom, feels that in order for a poem to be characterized as truly Jewish it must be written from within a matrix of Jewish values and concerns, not, Levine's statement implies, a matrix of strictly aesthetic values and concerns.

Franz Rosenzweig . . . defined the six points of the Star of David as representing God, land, people, creation, revelation, and redemption. To my mind, the authentic Jewish writer must find a place somewhere within those six points. (HL,23)

Indeed, most Jewish writers may fail to find a place somewhere within those six points. Most American-Jewish

writers would not actively seek to locate themselves within such a configuration. But one or more of those six points consistently seems to locate itself within the consciousness of the American-Jewish writer. Or, from a less mystical perspective, we could say that even the most minimal contact with Jewish culture in a writer's childhood is sufficient to expose him to one or more of those points, which will subsequently continue to influence the poet throughout his lifetime.

While I share the sense that an American-Jewish poetry centered on covenantal principles, or one that consciously wrestled with covenantal principles, could yield a poetry that was more thoroughly Jewish and that might finally engage a Jewish audience, at least an intellectual Jewish audience, I disagree vigorously with the implication that to accomplish this the poet must limit his commitment to aesthetic values. Abundant evidence demonstrates that those poets who do limit themselves to parochial interests may indeed find a readership, however slight, within the Jewish community, though the poems written, lacking artistic integrity, will make no lasting contribution to the development of either Jewish or American culture. I am thankful that American-Jewish writers have not sacrificed aesthetic principles in the service of some greater or higher principle. I am equally thankful that aesthetic principles, however demanding, do not so occupy the working

consciousness of these poets that they lose sight of the world of which they write.

Furthermore, as I believe this study will demonstrate, among the interesting, diverse and lively crowd of American-Jewish poets who do strive for artistic integrity, a dialogue with the Jewish past continues, however indirectly or faintly that dialogue is recorded. The breadth of the dialogue is, naturally, limited by each poet's own Jewish experiences and education, which in most cases are typically social and cultural rather than religious and historical. Nonetheless, these Jewish experiences, often originating in childhood, are powerful enough to produce a lasting effect on each poet's work.

Whatever the source of Jewish influence on him, the American-Jewish poet writing in English seems to experience greater freedom to choose whether or not to confront his Jewishness directly in poetry than the other significant group of American-Jewish poets: those writing in Yiddish. Several examples of American-Yiddish poetry, which remains linked immediately to Jewish heritage by, if nothing else, the language in which it is written, demonstrate more overtly than American-Jewish poetry written in English the interaction between Jewishness and modern and contemporary poetic values.

The American-Jewish poet, writing in American English, from the outset of his career works within the framework of

American and English literary traditions. He is schooled at the feet of Whitman and Keats and enters an ongoing conversation with his poetic forebears, occasionally admitting a subject foreign to that literary tradition, the subject of the Jew, into his work. Indeed, writing directly of the Jew often constitutes a self-conscious and relatively courageous act on the part of the American-Jewish poet writing in English. The American-Jewish poet writing in Yiddish, on the other hand, begins his career working within the framework of Jewish traditions and only by a self-conscious act of rejection takes the brave step beyond that pale and enters the world of modern poetry.<sup>7</sup> Thus the evolutionary process of the American-Jewish poet writing in English and the American-Yiddish poet are essentially the reverse of one another.

In its early days--the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries--American-Yiddish poetry spoke directly to the community of Jewish immigrants recently arrived in America.<sup>8</sup> One of the dominant schools of poetry to emerge during that time was the sweatshop school, whose poets produced works that spoke directly to the hard life of labor Jewish immigrants endured. Morris Rosenfeld, "the first Yiddish poet to gain international fame," was one of the leading poets associated with the group. His poem "The Sweatshop," set in a three-story house, is a mini-sociological study of immigrant life in the early twentieth

century. On the street floor "scoundrels" sit in a tavern and "all day long they souse" (MYV,84). One floor above them, in the Bible room, "Jews sob out their prayers." Finally, on the third floor is a windowless room in which Jewish laborers, "blighted women, blighted men, with their spirits broken, and their bodies spent," toil "without letup" under the constant supervision of the "scurf-head" boss who acts like "His Royal Highness.", One can see clearly the appeal this poem would have for the blighted, broken workers. It is the type of poem which could become their anthem. With its lack of emotional restraint, however, it cannot rank among the great poems of the period of high modernism. It was a poem with a specifically targeted audience, and in that audience's eyes it was successful.

Two movements within the history of American-Yiddish poetry distinguish themselves for their rejection of the exclusively nationalistic focus of the Yiddish poetry which precedes them. In 1907 a school known as Di Yunge (The Young Ones) emerged, which broke decisively from the entrapments of their collective Jewish past and demanded the freedom to write "as they wished, out of personal feelings and apart from the social programs or communal (Jewish-national) interests" (MYV,21). Their interest was aesthetic. They "refused the burdens of political activism; they rejected the notion that Yiddish poets had to speak for

a collective ethos; they wished to see Yiddish literature treated as an end in itself" (MYV, 27).

In two poems by Mani Leyb, one of Di Yunge's leaders, we can clearly see the self-conscious modern Jewish poet struggling to locate his new role within the Jewish community as well as within the literary community. The poem "I Am . . ." even from its title introduces the spirit of modernism into Yiddish poetry. "I am Mani Leyb," the poem begins, "whose name is sung--In Brownsville, Yehupets, and farther, they know it" (MYV, 128). This poem attempts to celebrate a personality, not a community; it marks the individual's effort to separate himself from the collective consciousness. However light-hearted the tone may be, laced as it is with a hint of self-mockery, the poet's sights are set on a fame that extends well beyond the limits of Brownsville, a Jewish district in Brooklyn, and Yehupets, the fictional name of a city adopted by Sholem Aleichem to represent Kiev, as the editor's note to the poem reminds us.

Nonetheless, Mani Leyb suffers from a divided identity. "Among cobblers" he is known as "a splendid cobbler; among/Poetical circles, a splendid poet." But as a poet among cobblers, Leyb is regarded as an enigmatic creature and is misunderstood by his coworkers. Leyb portrays the poet in customary romantic terms.

A boy straining over the cobbler's last  
 On moonlit nights . . . like a command,  
 Some hymn struck at my heart, and fast  
 The awl fell from my trembling hand.

Gracious, the first Muse came to meet  
 The cobbler with a kiss, and, young,  
 I tasted the Word that comes in a sweet  
 Shuddering first to the speechless tongue.

And my tongue flowed like a limpid stream,  
 My song rose as from some other place;  
 My world's doors opened onto dream;  
 My labor, my bread, were sweet with grace.

And of all the others, the shoemaker boys,  
 Thought that my singing was simply grand:  
 For their bitter hearts, my poems were joys.  
 Their source? They could never understand.

Though the "shoemaker boys" appear to derive some pleasure from Leyb's verse, drawn from whatever mysterious source, in the next stanza we learn that the poet, finally, is unwelcome in the shop. "For despair in their working day's vacuity/They mocked me, spat at me a good deal. . . . "

So, "with songs in my breast, the Muse in my heart," Leyb enters the company of poets, only to discover that poets are not compensated for their art sufficiently to avoid starvation. "While we gagged on hunger, our sick chests pounded:/More than one of us left this world." God may feed the lowly worm, but He is "not quite lavish with his grace" toward poets, Leyb laments. Thus he returns to his former job, with a blessing for the Muse whom he vows to serve at his bench: "I'll serve you solely until I am dead." Leyb closes the poem with this final assessment of his

identity: "I'm not a cobbler who writes, thank heaven,/But a poet who makes shoes."

This sentimental poem holds my interest in that it records clearly one Jewish poet's attempt to break from the community, if only in his imagination. In his romantic understanding of the poetic process, Leyb still needs to envision the source of his poetry as coming from outside. But rather than subordinate himself to the Jewish God, Leyb subordinates himself to the Muse. Leyb steps away from the Hebraic tradition and toward a Hellenistic tradition, for, as he has discovered, God starves His poets but the Muse blesses hers with bounties. Still, the Muse does not survive unchallenged, for as we have seen the poem begins with a firm statement of self-importance: "I am Mani Leyb." The process of transition from Jewish-American poet to American-Jewish poet is thus implied in the poem as the poet moves from God to the Muse to the Self.

As the poets in groups such as Di Yunge divorced themselves from the Jewish community, they found themselves with an increasingly shrinking audience. As the editors of the new Penguin edition of Modern Yiddish Verse inform us, "No sooner did Yiddish poetry break from folk constraints and ideological formulas than it became a poetry mainly of the little magazine and for the elite audience--not so very different from the fate of poets in Western countries" (MYV, 45). Ironically, we can measure the success of the

American-Yiddish poets's attempts to enter the kingdom of modern poetry by the degree to which they succeed in alienating their audience!

Leyb expresses the frustration of the modern Jewish poet when he writes, in his sonnet of envy "To the Gentile Poet," "I, a poet of the Jews--who needs it!" (MYV,138) Earlier I suggested that some of the Yiddish-American poets divorced themselves from the Jewish community. A separation, perhaps, would be the more accurate metaphor, for as we see here no matter how deeply the poet strives to embrace and absorb literary culture he remains self-conscious about his Jewish identity and his failure to serve the Jewish community and the Jewish God adequately. Unlike the lucky "bard of the gentiles" whose songs are answered by "all the far-flung elsewheres, by fullness of fields, by wide city squares, by sated hearts' serenity fulfilled," the Jewish poet, applauded and rewarded neither by Gentile nor Jew, chants "amid the alien corn, the tears of desert wanderers under alien stars."

Another poet associated with Di Yunge, Moyshe-Leyb Halpern expresses his ultimate disdain for a life devoted to poetry in his lively poem from the 1920s, "The Will."

So this is how I did myself in:  
 No sooner did the sun begin  
 To shine, than I was up and away,  
 Gathering goat shit for my tune--  
 The one I wrote just yesterday  
 About the moonlight and the moon--  
 And then I put with these also

Some poems from my portfolio  
In re the Bible's sanctity  
(Just thinking of them sickens me)  
And these I wrapped up in my rag  
Of an old coat, packed up like a bag,  
After which, I took the whole shebang,  
Put up a nail, and let it hang  
Outside my window, on a tray. (MYV,190)

In response to passersby who wonder "what that mess up there could be," Halpern responds, "These are all my years; I think/They went all rotten with infection/By wisdom, and its ancient stink,/From my precious book collection."

Wonderfully irreverent toward poetry as well as Biblical and rabbinic wisdom, the poet goes on to forbid his "son and heir" from following in his father's footsteps, from competing for the laurel crown. Indeed, the poet/father invites his son to become anything--murderer, arsonist, loan shark, womanizer--anything but a poet. The penalty for disobedience? The father will cut the son out of his will, "And so help me God in Heaven/This/Will/Be/Done" (MYV,192).

The wit shines in this poem that sums up the modern Jewish poet's frustration over a life devoted to art at the same time that it demonstrates Halpern's success in writing a fully-realized modern Jewish poem. This father wishes to pass on to his son neither the legacy of religion nor the legacy of art, for both apparently fail to sustain the Jew in the modern world.

Indeed, as writers after WWII realized, neither religion nor art prevented the Holocaust, a tragedy which left no aspect of Jewish life untouched. Jacob Glatstein was a Yiddish poet originally associated with the In Zikh (Inside the Self) group of poets, a group which followed the Di Yunge poets. Unlike the predecessor group, the In Zikh poets were steeped in American literature and knew well the poetry of Pound, Eliot, Moore, Stevens (MYV,38). The earlier group had begun making the transition toward a poetry which was personal; the latter group "wanted to write poems completely and unequivocally personal; to evoke the bitter realities of Jewish experience; to venture in Yiddish upon the imagistic and free-verse experiments which had begun in American poetry" (MYV,38). The In Zikh poets as well had adopted the dominant aesthetic position of the period that form and content are one, as they announced in their 1920 opening manifesto (MYV,38).

Though Glatstein fully embraced these principles throughout the 1920s and accordingly had his gaze turned outward, away from the Jewish community and toward a national and international community of poets, the events of the Second World War influenced him as well as many others to look once again toward the fate of their own people and to take up an ancient argument in their poetry, the argument with God. In the poem "Genesis," for instance, Glatstein writes of the failure of the universalist tendencies of both

God and His people. "You've [God] deserted field and barn;/I, the close love of my people./We've both turned universal" (MYV, 458).

In light of the Holocaust, then, Glatstein proposes a new beginning, a return to particularism.

Come back, dear God, to a land no bigger than a speck. Dwindle down to only ours.  
I'll go around with homely sayings  
suitable for chewing over in small places.  
We'll both be provincial,  
God and His poet.

While the poem does call for a return to an earlier form of relations between God and the Jews, it retains some of the individualistic and secular spirit of modernism, as implied by the concluding two lines of the preceding passage. This is a personal poem in that it records one man's reassessment of the Jewish situation as well as his particular Jewish situation. God has abandoned the Jews; the poet too has abandoned the Jews. This poem would like to initiate a reconciliation between God and His people and the poet and his people.

The poem then marks a bridge back toward a more exclusively Jewish framework. The self-interested poet, however, does not sacrifice his personal goals in order to serve God. In fact, in the world envisioned by the poet, he imagines that like God, celebrated upon His return to His Chosen People, he too will be treated as a returning hero, he will be fed and fondled like a child by his people, he

will be "rocked in cozy fame." Modernism has left its mark on this Jewish poet, who will continue to celebrate himself at the same time he celebrates his people and his God. Nonetheless, Glatstein speaks in a definitive way for his people in the concluding stanza of the poem.

We have followed You into Your wide world  
and sickened there.  
Save Yourself, return  
with Your pilgrims who go up  
to a little land. Come back,  
be our Jewish God again. (MYV, 462)

In the early decades of the century the Western world held out a promise to the Jews: Moyshe-Leyb Halpern had little difficulty in choosing the Muse over God. But by mid-century that promise appears to have been shattered: Glatstein closes his poem with an invocation to the Jewish God.

Kadya Molodovsky also takes up the difficult post-Holocaust argument with God in her devotional poem "God of Mercy," which begins, "O God of Mercy/For the time being/Choose another people" (MYV, 330). The poem expresses the exhaustion of the Jewish people who are "tired of death, tired of corpses" and who "have no more prayers." The poem concludes with a powerful request.

God of Mercy  
To us give rough clothing  
Of shepherds who tend sheep  
Of blacksmiths at the hammer  
Of washerwomen, cattle slaughterers  
And lower still.

And O God of Mercy  
Grant us one more blessing--  
Take back the divine glory of our genius.  
(MYV, 332)

Molodovsky's plea is the exact opposite of Glatstein's. Nonetheless, they originate from the same source. After the Holocaust both poets painfully reflect on God's relation to the Jews and both conclude that the terms of that relationship must change.

In the strongest American-Yiddish poetry the poets find a balance between high artistic standards and an unsentimental representation of Jewish subjects. As the poems of Glatstein, Halpern, Leyb and others demonstrate, the Jew is fully capable of mastering the language of modern poetry. But no matter how far the Yiddish poet strays from the Jewish community as far as subject matter and style are concerned, he remains married to the Jewish community by virtue of the language in which he writes and, as the Holocaust has reminded him, his origins.

The American-Jewish poet writing in English neither enjoys nor suffers constant affiliation with the Jews through language. For him, the practice of modernist or post-modernist techniques in poetry is not predicated on a breach of covenant, an attempted abandonment of Jewish religious and/or national identity. His aspirations as a poet do not conflict with the expectations a Jewish community, with which he does not identify, imposes upon

him, implicitly or explicitly. Writing serious poetry brings the American-Jewish poet into conflict, even if only self-perceived, with the Jewish community only when a Jewish literary critic scolds the poet for not being Jewish enough in his work. Consequently, the American-Jewish poet writing in English has more apparent freedom than the American-Yiddish poet either to ignore the Jewish features of his consciousness or to relegate them to a position of only secondary importance.

Still, while tension between the American-Jewish poet and the American-Jewish community may be minimal, tension between the Jew and the non-Jew continues to function as a direct shaping influence on American-Jewish poetry. Despite the truly broad-based acceptance of Jews into American society, anti-Semitism survives in this country.<sup>9</sup> Not surprisingly, even assimilated Jews have been shocked or horrified by the continuation of anti-Semitism. One of the consequences of anti-Semitism, national or international, has been to sharpen and to intensify, if only for what seems a fleeting moment, the Jewish identity of certain American Jews, including American-Jewish poets.

The Holocaust, the ultimate expression of anti-Semitism, had a profound impact on Yiddish poetry; the Holocaust had an equally strong, though perhaps less direct, impact on American-Jewish poetry. Little was written on the Holocaust immediately following the war. But by the mid-

1950s works of poetry and prose on the subject gradually began to appear. Often, the underlying theme of the poems was guilt: the American-Jewish poet used the poem as a form of catharsis for his guilt at having been an American Jew and therefore saved from the fate of his European brothers and sisters. What underlies the guilt, of course, is a recognition of unity, Jew to Jew, a community identity which is always latent in the poet and his work.

In fact, the reawakened sociological bond is but one of the ways, albeit the more direct, in which the Holocaust affects the American-Jewish poet. The second impact occurs on the level of language, on the literary aesthetic. Among other things, the Holocaust demonstrated the horrifying consequences of a systematic corruption of language, a degenerative process that had been occurring throughout the century. One aspect of the German bureaucratic process, as identified by Hannah Arendt in her study Eichmann in Jerusalem, was the adoption of "language rules," a code name for lies actually, that were to be followed in all official German correspondence referring to the killing of Jews.<sup>10</sup>

All the correspondence referring to killing Jews was subject to rigid language rule and except for the reports of the Einsatzgruppen (the killing squads) it is rare to find documents in which such bald words as extermination, liquidation or killing occur. The prescribed code names for killing were final solution, evacuation and special treatment, deportation, change of residence and labor in the east.<sup>11</sup>

According to Murray Baumgarten, summarizing this aspect of Arendt's study, language rules served two main functions: "to protect oneself from admitting the enormity of what one was doing; and to maintain order and sanity and let the machine function smoothly, serving as a public mask" (B,120). The lesson to be drawn from this abuse of language has global implications.

What is at stake . . . is not just a matter of the right vocabulary or the right sentence structure, but the ways in which we think about and use words. It is not surprising to find that destruction of western culture, which culminated in the Holocaust, at work in language, for the discarding of values that was perhaps the cause and certainly the result of the destruction of European Jewry is basically a voiding of language. Six million is a number, not a meaning, and its six zeroes represent graphically the semantic hole burned in the traditions and languages of the West by the catastrophe of Nazism. (B,122)

Most poets of this century have been opposed to the debasement of the language in the hands of politicians, advertisers, bad journalists, etc. When Marianne Moore instructs poets and readers of poetry that it is not "valid to discriminate against 'business documents and school-books,'" she qualifies her statement by noting that "when dragged into prominence by half poets, the result is not poetry."<sup>12</sup> Though Moore's intention may have been to indicate the poetic potential of all styles of language, we can drag another implication from her statement: half poets

fail to uncover the lie masquerading as truth in institutional discourse.

Many American-Jewish poets, of course, share a commitment to a meaningful and faithful use of language. "Nothing is more obvious than what our politicians are doing to our language," says Philip Levine, "so that if poets insist on the truth, or on an accurate rendition, or on a faithful use of language, if they for instance insist on an accurate depiction of people's lives as they are actually lived--this is a political act."<sup>13</sup> The aesthetics of content, the morally-grounded aesthetics of language used to represent accurately the lives people live, does not belong exclusively to Jewish writers. But the Holocaust as a tragic event in which language played a significant role has had a particularly profound effect on American-Jewish poets: as Jews, they are reminded of their vulnerability in the modern world; as poets, they are horrified by the corruption of the language. Though its impact may only be indirect, ultimately this historic event strengthens the poets' commitments to language which is concrete not abstract, language which reveals rather than conceals, language which is meaningful not meaningless, language which is true not false, language which accurately represents the world in which they live.

Unfortunately, the threat of anti-Semitism is equally strong within as it is without the literary community. Eliot

and Pound, two of the leading voices of modernist poetry, both of American heritage, each went through periods of being openly anti-Semitic. Pound's expression of anti-Semitism was the more vitriolic of the two, though Eliot's "Burbank with a Baedeker: Bleisten with a Cigar" as well as his statement in After Strange Gods--"reasons of race and religion combine to make any large number of free-thinking Jews undesirable"--mark his unmistakably anti-Semitic attitudes.<sup>14</sup> (Eliot disavowed After Strange Gods after publication; he never, on the other hand, "disavowed" "Burbank. . . .")

The extent to which the anti-Semitism of these two influential poets troubled young American Jews embarking on a career as modernist poets is, in most cases, difficult to measure. It would be nearly impossible to write in the modernist spirit without incorporating at least some of the aesthetic principles outlined by Pound and successfully demonstrated by Eliot. Nonetheless, some American-Jewish poets were indeed conscious of the moral conflict implied by writing under the influence of Eliot and Pound.

One of the most vocal opponents of the godfathers of modernist poetry was Karl Shapiro, though his famous rejection of Eliot and Pound came nearly a decade and a half after he first praised their work. "[W]e have proof in Eliot, for example, that the triumph/Of a new form is certain," Shapiro writes in 1945 in Essay on Rime.<sup>15</sup> In the

same work Shapiro notes that "the two great prosodists of our age/Are Joyce and Eliot, both of whom are bound/In filial respect to Ezra Pound" (ER,16). This is a far cry from Shapiro's condemnation in the late 1950s of the same two poets, who, according to his reassessment, fail both on the grounds of their prosody as well as their cultural vision.

Among other American-Jewish poets criticism of Eliot extended into a rejection of New Criticism, an approach to reading and writing which by the mid- to late-1950s many American poets believed was having a detrimental influence on American poetry. Ignatow, for instance, identifies and criticizes the "two chief, indivisible positions held by Eliot plus certain members of the New Criticism: their clericalism and their detachment from the social scene."<sup>16</sup> He continues, "By their own acknowledgment they have taught a studied withdrawal from society, in which is implicit a condemnation of the present state of our culture." Ignatow himself did not refrain from criticizing the "present state of our culture" in his work, though he certainly did not condone Eliot's implicitly proposed solution to our problems, a solution based on Eliot's "clericalism," a solution which would virtually exclude Jews from all positions of power, whether political, intellectual, spiritual or cultural.

Ignatow was another poet who undoubtedly recognized the implicit anti-Semitism that, as Robert Alter has demonstrated, permeates much of Eliot's work. Alter suggests that one effect of the "density of discontinuous allusion" in Eliot's poetry "is to invoke the whole range of the European cultural tradition in a way that suggests the tradition is at once universal and esoteric, impenetrable to the outsider. The Jew in this regard is important to Eliot as the archetypal outsider, a European who is not a Christian, which for Eliot is a virtual self-contradiction."<sup>17</sup> Neither as American nor as Jew could this aesthetic suit the temperament of Ignatow or of most other American Jews.

The process by which a poet arrives at his aesthetic, his style, is truly mysterious. Often poets articulate their aesthetics in prose statements and then adhere to them as if they were programmatic only after their style has been arrived at through the practice of their art. Thus, to claim that Shapiro or Ignatow or Levine ultimately rejected Eliot's aesthetic program solely because it was one which excluded Jews might be difficult to defend. Nonetheless, we might regard Ignatow's, Shapiro's and Levine's aesthetic interest in William Carlos Williams, a poet who would not offend their Jewish sensibilities, as having been at least in part motivated by their intuitive or conscious repulsion to Eliot.

An indication of a more positive expression (not defensive or reactionary) of Jewish consciousness in American poetry is the influence one American-Jewish poet has had on another. American-Jewish poets may not enter into a dialogue with the American-Jewish community; however, a small but growing body of evidence exists that American-Jewish poets do enter into a dialogue amongst themselves in their poems on Jewish subjects. Consider, for instance, Emma Lazarus's poem "The New Year: Rosh-Hashanah, 5643 (1882)" and John Hollander's "At the New Year." Both poems begin by distinguishing the Jewish New Year, celebrated in Autumn, from the Gentile New Year, celebrated in the dead of winter. Lazarus writes,

Not while the snow-shroud round dead earth is rolled,  
And naked branches point to frozen skies,--  
When orchards burn their lamps of fiery gold,  
    The grape glows like a jewel, and the corn  
A sea of beauty and abundance lies,  
    Then the new year is born.<sup>18</sup>

Hollander's poem echoes Lazarus.

let it [the new year] come at a time like this,  
    not at winter's  
Night, when a few dead leaves crusted with frost  
        lie shivering  
On our doorsteps to be counted, or when our  
        moments of coldness  
Rise up to chill us again. But let us say at a  
        golden  
Moment just on the edge of harvesting,  
    "Yes. Now."<sup>19</sup>

In both poems America is celebrated as the new homeland for the Jews, though Lazarus's attitude toward America as the new Jewish homeland is unreservedly enthusiastic, whereas Hollander's is skeptical. Lazarus writes,

Even as the Prophet promised, so your tent  
Hath been enlarged unto earth's farthest rim.  
To snow-capped Sierras from vast steppes ye went,  
Through fire and blood and tempest-tossing wave,  
For freedom to proclaim and worship Him,  
Mighty to slay and save. (EL,38)

Hollander introduces the theme of the promises offered by life in America in a subtler manner.

here amidst showers  
Of shiny fruits, both the sweet and the bitter-  
tasting results,  
The honey of promises gleams on apples that  
turn to mud  
In our innermost of mouths, we can sit facing  
westward  
Toward imminent rich tents, telling and  
remembering. (JH,120)

Though Hollander carries the agricultural motif throughout the poem, material abundance ("showers of shiny fruits," "rich tents"), the promise of abundance ("the honey of promises gleams on apples"), as well as the invocation of the myth of the American West suggest that Hollander is commenting on the materialistic debasement of the Jewish New Year as celebrated in America. Indeed, an immanent God is replaced with "imminent rich tents" in America.

Hollander's allusion to the earlier Lazarus poem suggests the modest beginnings of a true Jewish literary

tradition in American poetry. Other examples of intertexuality are less clear cut, though various indications of a dialogue between poems on Jewish subjects do exist. Robert Mezey's "To Levine on the Day of Atonement," for instance, does not derive from a specific poem by his fellow poet Philip Levine; it does, however, speak to an experience the two poets, and many American Jews, share.

Impenitent, we meet again,  
As Gentile as your wife or mine,  
And pour into a jelly glass  
The cheapest California wine.

Jewless in Gaza, we have come  
Where worldly likenesses commence  
Gathering fury, and still we keep  
Some dark, essential difference.<sup>20</sup>

Both poets have married Gentile wives, both are "impenitent," breaking Yom Kippur's holy fast by drinking cheap wine, and both are swept up in the fury of assimilation; nonetheless both retain some "essential difference" from the Gentile majority. In one of his own early poems, "Night Thoughts over a Sick Child," Levine too addresses his weakened though persistent Jewish identity. He describes himself as "heir to an ancestral curse/though fallen from Judah's tree," and he anticipates the day when his son too will "escape his heritage."<sup>21</sup> The essential subject matter, the elevated diction, and the grave tone link these two poems, these two poets, self-consciously

Jewish in the early stages of their careers, who, in Mezey's words, have "[n]othing to atone for but the long,/Blurred perspectives of the dead."

Yet another manifestation of this Jewish literary dialogue between American poets is the adaptation of the Kaddish, the Jewish prayer for the dead, into an American literary form. The most famous American literary Kaddish is Allen Ginsberg's elegy for his mother, which ironically represents a classic spiritual process as Ginsberg in the poem works his way through the depths of horror and grief toward an affirmation of God. Intensely personal and boldly explicit, Ginsberg's "Kaddish" documents a period of American social history as it records the facts of the Russian-Jewish immigrant Naomi Ginsberg's life. Furthermore, it insists on its link to the Jewish spiritual tradition in the midst of the fury of American life. "I've been up all night, talking, talking, reading the Kaddish aloud, listening to Ray Charles shout blind on the phonograph," the poem/prayer begins, giving a central prayer from the Jewish liturgy and the music of a leading artist from the American blues tradition equal status as tools to aid in the grieving process.<sup>22</sup> The boldest juxtaposition of the sacred and the profane, as it were, occurs later in the poem.

One time I thought she was trying to make me  
come lay her--flirting to herself at sink--lay  
back on huge bed that filled most of the room,

dress up round her hips, big slash of hair, scars of operations, pancreas, belly wounds, abortions, appendix, stitching of incisions pulling down in the fat like hideous thick zippers--ragged long lips between her legs--What, even, smell of asshole? I was cold--later revolted a little, not much--seemed perhaps a good idea to try--know the Monster of the Beginning Womb--Perhaps--that way. Would she care? She needs a lover.

Yisborach, v'yistabach, v'yispoar,  
v'yisroman, v'yinsnaseh, v'yishador, v'yishalleh,  
v'yishallol, sh'meh d'kudsho, b'rich hu. (AG,24)

The juxtaposition of the explicitly rendered Oedipal moment with the transliterated passage from the Hebrew Kaddish itself suggests the potency of the prayer for Ginsberg as he recites it to sanctify his recollection of the most intimate encounter possible between him and his mother.

As Ginsberg's poem enters into a dialogue with an ancient Jewish text, it also contributes to a dialogue between American-Jewish poems. One of the predecessors to Ginsberg's poem was Charles Reznikoff's "Kaddish" (1936). Like Ginsberg's, Reznikoff's poem attempts to update the Jewish prayer. Reznikoff's poem, however, remains more faithful to the Hebrew original than Ginsberg's. Reznikoff's version begins with a literal prose translation of the original prayer, included as an epigraph to the poem, and then in its first stanza quotes directly from the translation, modernizing it by breaking the prose into lines of free verse. Reznikoff's departure from the original begins in the second stanza.

upon Israel and upon all who meet with unfriendly  
 glances, sticks and stones and names--  
 on posters, in newspapers, or in books to last,  
 chalked on asphalt or in acid on glass,  
 shouted from a thousand thousand windows by radio;  
 who are pushed out of class-rooms and rushing  
 trains,  
 whom the hundred hands of a mob strike,  
 and whom jailers strike with bunches of keys, with  
 revolver butts;  
 to them and to you  
 in this place and in every place  
 safety . . . 23

The poem departs from the traditional prayer in its adaptation of some of the imagistic principles of modernism. It also converts a timeless prayer into a historical document. Still, the poem remains impersonal, recording a communal consciousness rather than one individual's spiritual journey. The poem is groundbreaking in that it introduces a specifically Jewish form of elegy into the American literary tradition.

One of the successors to Ginsberg's poem is David Ignatow's "Kaddish," published in 1981. Ignatow's "Kaddish" continues the trajectory defined by Ginsberg's poem as it moves yet further away from the original prayer, this time virtually erasing all traces of the original except for the identifying shell, as it were, provided by the title. "Mother of my birth, for how long were we together/in your love and my adoration of your self?" Ignatow's poem begins, substituting mother worship for God worship.<sup>24</sup> The poem concludes with another substitution: earth worship for mother worship.

Earth now is your mother, as you were mine, my earth,  
my sustenance and my strength,  
and now without you I turn to your mother  
and seek from her that I may meet you again  
in rock and stone. Whisper to the stone,  
I love you. Whisper to the rock, I found you.  
Whisper to the earth, Mother, I have found her,  
and I am safe and always have been.

Just as Reznikoff's poem made Ginsberg's radical "Kaddish" possible, so too Ginsberg's made Ignatow's quieter and more traditionally romantic elegy for his mother possible. These poets and others have tested and stretched the original "Kaddish" form, Americanizing it, transforming it into a viable genre of American poetry. And though there has yet to emerge a formula for the composition of an American Kaddish, the genre is slowly identifying and establishing itself, further evidence of a simmering conversation among American-Jewish poets. Perhaps the genre will achieve full status once a Gentile poet writes his or her own Kaddish.

Allen Ginsberg, a poet who claims the mantle of Whitman and Williams, may be responsible more than any other poet of this century for advancing the position of the American-Jewish poet to center stage. "A Jew to the Jew he seems," wrote Whitman in "Song of the Answerer," describing a man in whom everyone, congressman and mechanic, soldier and artist, sees himself reflected.<sup>25</sup> Ginsberg himself is many things to many people, gay to gay, Beat to Beat, Buddhist to

Buddhist, political radical to political radical, and, yes, Jew to Jew. Indeed, it is the Ginsberg of "Kaddish" who fulfills the promise America held out to its Jewish poets as it is the poem "Kaddish" that dramatically announces to other American-Jewish poets that it is acceptable to write openly as a Jew in America. "I remember reading Allen Ginsberg back in the fifties when I was at Iowa [the Iowa Writers' Workshop], and liking him better than anything anyone was liking at Iowa," recalls Levine, and "I remember when Kaddish first came out--I happen to think it's one of the great American poems . . . " (DA, 20, 26).

But Ginsberg's aesthetic influence did not extend to all corners of American poetry. Furthermore, his early poetry did not finally lead to a flood of explicitly Jewish work, though it did point toward a previously unmined source of material and inspiration for new American-Jewish poetry: the Kabbalah; the esoteric, mystical Jewish tradition. Poets as diverse as John Hollander, David Meltzer and Jerome Rothenberg have indeed explored the Jewish mystical tradition and have incorporated its symbology in their work.<sup>26</sup> They have also adapted certain meditative techniques of writing from Kabbalistic sources.

Jewishness has survived in American poetry, either as a defensive reaction or a flag of one's alienation, morality, destiny, or, more rarely, a source of one's strength and pride. Like Bloom, Levine, Ozick and other critics, I

remain frustrated over the limited and often superficial ways American poets have represented Jewish life in their work. I wish, for instance, that there were a first-rate American-Jewish religious poet, someone comparable in talent and devotion to, say, Hopkins. However, I am equally frustrated with these critics who are so eager to dismiss American-Jewish poetry that they themselves fail to explore adequately the historical and literary-historical conditions which have affected the development of American-Jewish poetry, as well as the subtle nuances of Jewishness that are often present, the grain as it were, in the poems, especially when the poets are least self-consciously Jewish.

The three poets whom I have chosen to study--Karl Shapiro, David Ignatow, and Philip Levine--represent individualistic responses to Jewishness in their poetry. This is as it must be, for the Jewish culture which survives in American poems is a product of individuals, not a communal, collective, authorized Jewish response to the twentieth-century world. All three share an ambivalence to their Jewish identities. Shapiro's Jewish identity is strongest when he feels threatened by anti-Semitism, especially as expressed by Pound and Eliot. Ignatow's Jewish identity, rarely expressed directly in his poems, is strongest at the times of his mother's and father's deaths. While Ignatow retains a strong distaste for institutionalized Jewish religion, he continues to be deeply

inspired by the poetry of the psalms and the prophets. Levine, too, finds his bond to Jewish culture in the Hebrew Scriptures, though as he records the moral failings of his age he seems to be constantly lamenting the failure of the Biblical vision to sustain him. Each of these poets wrestles with the particular Jewish demon that has come to haunt his life; each records the struggle in poems that often seem remote from the subject of the Jew but upon close examination reveal underpinnings that can be traced to particular Jewish experiences in each man's life.

One must remain somewhat suspicious of a study such as this which I have undertaken. And I confess, my motives were other than that of the purely disinterested scholar. I am a Jew, a poet, and an American in search of a Jewish-American poetic tradition. I hope this study will help define and characterize that tradition as it exists in America. Where the sketch remains fuzzy may lie the potential for future development of this tradition. At least this is my justification for leaving some areas, some paths, intriguingly unilluminated.

Notes

1. Harold Bloom, "The Sorrows of American-Jewish Poetry," in Figures of Capable Imagination (New York: The Seabury Press, 1976), p. 247.
2. John Hollander, "Violet," in Spectral Emanations: New and Selected Poems (New York: Atheneum, 1978), p. 39.
3. Harold Bloom, "Still Haunted by Covenant," in The New York Times Book Review, 31 January 1988, p. 35.
4. Herbert J. Levine, "The Hyphenated Life of American-Jewish Poetry," Reconstructionist, 53, No. 3 (1987), p. 23.
5. Robert Alter, "Jewish Dreams and Nightmares," in After the Tradition: Essays on Modern Jewish Writing, (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1971), p. 34.
6. Cynthia Ozick, "Toward a New Yiddish," Art & Ardor, (New York: E. P. Dutton, Inc., 1984), p. 157.
7. What I am calling "American-Yiddish" poets are, after all, first generation immigrants to America. As such, they retain strong ties to the Eastern European Jewish communities from which they emigrated, unlike the second- or third-generation American-Jews with whom most of this study will be concerned.
8. The historical information on Yiddish poetry comes from the introductions to two volumes of Yiddish poetry translated into English, A Treasury of Yiddish Poetry, eds. Irving Howe and Eliezer Greenberg (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1969), pp. 1 - 66; and The Penguin Book of Modern Yiddish Verse, edited by Irving Howe, Ruth R. Wisse, and Khone Shmeruk (New York: Viking Penguin Inc., 1987), pp. 1 - 50. Specific textual citations will be noted in the text as either TYP or MYV respectively.
9. The history of American anti-Semitism has now begun to receive serious scholarly attention. See, for instance, David A. Gerber, ed., Anti-Semitism in American History (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987).
10. The discussion of Arendt, German language rules and the corruption of language comes from Murray Baumgarten's intelligent book, City Scriptures: Modern Jewish Writing (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), pp. 117-124.

11. Hannah Arendt, Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil (New York: Viking, 1963), p. 80.
12. Marianne Moore, "Poetry," in The Harper Anthology of American Literature, Volume 2, eds., Donald McQuade, et al. (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1987), p. 1622.
13. Philip Levine, Don't Ask (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1981), p. 13.
14. T. S. Eliot, After Strange Gods: A Primer of Modern Heresy (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1934), p. 20.
15. Karl Shapiro, Essay on Rime (New York: Random House, 1945), p. 12.
16. David Ignatow, Open Between Us (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1980), p. 167.
17. Robert Alter, "Eliot, Lawrence, and the Jews," in Defenses of the Imagination: Jewish Writers and Modern Historical Crisis (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 5738/1977), p. 145.
18. Emma Lazarus, "The New Year: Rosh-Hashanah, 5643 (1882)", Emma Lazarus: Selections from her Poetry and Prose (New York: Emma Lazarus Federation of Jewish Women's Clubs, 1967), p. 37.
19. John Hollander, "At the New Year," Spectral Emanations: New and Selected Poems (New York: Atheneum, 1978), p. 120.
20. Robert Mezey, "To Levine on the Day of Atonement," The Door Standing Open (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 6.
21. Philip Levine, "Night Thoughts over a Sick Child," On the Edge (Iowa City: The Stone Wall Press, 1961), p. 11.
22. Allen Ginsberg, "Kaddish," Kaddish and Other Poems: 1958-1960 (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1961), p. 7.
23. Charles Reznikoff, "Kaddish," Poems 1918-1936: Volume I of The Complete Poems (Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow Press, 1978), pp. 185-186.
24. David Ignatow, "Kaddish," Whisper to the Earth (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1981), p. 40.
25. Walt Whitman, "Song of the Answerer," Leaves of Grass (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1973), p. 168. I am grateful to Herb Levine for alerting me to this passage.

26. For a study of the Kabbalistic influences on contemporary American poetry see R. Barbara Gitenstein, Apocalyptic Messianism and Contemporary Jewish-American Poetry (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986).

## CHAPTER 2 KARL SHAPIRO'S FRONTAL ATTACK

In Poems of a Jew (1958), Karl Shapiro boldly proclaims his Jewish identity to the world. Having selected poems from three previous volumes of poetry to which he added only a few new ones, Shapiro intended this collection to represent the centrality of what he identifies as a Jewish consciousness to his work, whether the poems address overtly Jewish subjects or not. An allusion to Emma Lazarus's 1882 book, Songs of a Semite, recognized as the first book in the American-Jewish poetry tradition, the title alone identifies Shapiro's book as a distinctively Jewish one.

But the book is not intended primarily for Jews, as one might mistakenly surmise from the title. As Shapiro perceives it, the subject of the Jew, his "obsession," is "universal and timeless."<sup>1</sup> The poems then are addressed to all readers seeking "in the poet's mind some clue to their own thoughts," in this case thoughts about the Jew. And to underscore the importance of the book's content, Shapiro instructs his readers not to read the poems as poets would, i.e., for aesthetic pleasure: "These poems are not for

poets," he states in the first line of the introduction (PJ, xi).

Shapiro's decision to identify himself decisively as a Jew in his work was the outgrowth of a longstanding occupation with the status of the Jew in American life as well as Western culture. That a Jewish upbringing left a strong imprint on his imagination is made evident by the many poems Shapiro published on the subject. In "My Grandmother," from his first book, Person, Place and Thing (1942), Shapiro recalls having watched his grandmother "at ragged book bent in Hebrew prayer," and he pities her that "history moved her through/Stranger lands and many houses,/Taking her exile for granted, confusing/The tongues and tasks of her children's children."<sup>2</sup> In "The Southerner," from his third book, Trial of a Poet (1947), he recalls his "Grandpa, the saintly Jew, keeping his beard/In difficult Virginia, yet endeared/Of blacks and farmers, although orthodox."<sup>3</sup>

Of course, as both these powerful and favorable recollections imply, Shapiro remained ambivalent about his own Jewish identity. In the introduction to V-Letter and Other Poems (1944), his second, Pulitzer Prize winning volume, Shapiro informs us, "I try to write freely, one day as a Christian, the next as a Jew. . . . "<sup>4</sup> In part I of "Recapitulations" he traces this ambivalence to his birth in a hospital where his mother was "tended by nuns" and a rabbi

and his father assisted at his circumcision. "I went home  
vulnerable and sore/*Influenced by Abraham and Mary*" (TP,3). In  
the 1940s, while on active duty in the Pacific, Shapiro even  
seriously considered converting to Christianity. This,  
finally, never came to pass.

Aside from the deeply influential Jewish childhood,  
another factor figured heavily in Shapiro's decision to  
assemble Poems of a Jew: the Holocaust and its aftermath.  
Perhaps the most direct confrontation Shapiro had with the  
vicious anti-Semitism of the age occurred within the  
literary community itself. Shapiro served as a member of  
the committee which selected Ezra Pound as the first  
recipient of the Bollingen Prize in 1948. Shapiro was the  
only member of the committee who voted against the award.

I voted against Pound in the balloting for the  
Bollingen Prize. My first and more crucial reason  
was that I am a Jew and cannot honor antisemites.  
My second reason I stated in a report which was  
circulated among the Fellows: 'I voted against  
Pound in the belief that the poet's political and  
moral philosophy ultimately vitiates his poetry  
and lowers its standard as literary work.'<sup>5</sup>

Shapiro regards this negative vote as the "turning point" in  
his life.

There was an enormous amount of publicity about it  
[Shapiro's vote]. It was a great blow to me, the  
publicity and scandal. I was suddenly forced into  
a conscious decision to stand up and be counted as  
a Jew. Jewish organizations got in touch with me,  
Jewish papers wanted me to write things for them,  
make me a spokesman.<sup>6</sup>

It was this event that triggered a reassessment of Shapiro's Jewish identity, this event which culminated, ultimately, in the publication of Poems of a Jew.

In the midst of the turmoil of this period, between roughly 1948 and 1960, Shapiro also reevaluated his aesthetics, a reevaluation that was very closely related to his Jewish life at the time. Shapiro's early success as a poet was in part due to his mastery and American adaptation of the style of Auden--a mastery, in fact, of the manners of English literary culture.<sup>7</sup> The "manner and diction of Shapiro's writing is all from Auden," wrote Delmore Schwartz in an early review of the newcomer's work.<sup>8</sup> But not long after his service on the Bollingen Prize committee, Shapiro expressed total disapproval of the English literary tradition from which his style derived. A contributor to the September 1949 Commentary symposium on the subject of "The Jewish Writer and the English Literary Tradition," a tradition which, as the editors note in their introduction, is "shot through with the notion of the Jew as a creature of darkness, deceit and corruption," Shapiro traces the development of his Jewish consciousness as it relates to European and American literary tradition.<sup>9</sup>

Ten years ago I would have answered, 'I am a product of European history and literature, as is every American writer.' But today, with the consciousness that from hour to hour Europe is voiding itself of its residuum of Jews, I answer differently. 'I am foreign matter to the European

tradition of life and letters, and if I do not believe in a new and separate American civilization, I shall have no other cultural identity. Today I have even lost my desire to visit the physical Europe [my emphasis].<sup>10</sup>

It is at this time as well that Shapiro dedicates himself to destroying "literary anti-Semitism."

Nothing will destroy the literary myth of the Bestial Jew except the creation of countermyths out of our modern exilic culture. I will not speculate on what such myths will be, but I feel it to be part of the work of American Jewish intellectuals to further this task. I see stirrings of a counter-mythos in the poetry of young Jews, and I pride myself on having a part of its inception.<sup>11</sup>

He concludes with a call to battle.

A frontal attack on the intellectual and artistic sensibilities of the best writers and thinkers of our time, with true works of art as our weapons, will surely pervade the consciousness of the anti-Jew who has not reached the pathological level.<sup>12</sup>

Shapiro's awakened sense of Jewish vulnerability accounts for the shift in his imagination's national identity as well as his dedication to contribute to the creation of "countermyths" of the Jew. Poems of a Jew is his artistic contribution to the Jewish literary work. In Defense of Ignorance (1960), Shapiro's controversial volume of essays, is his critical contribution to that work. The collection of critical essays is not presented as the essays of a Jew, but the critical positions Shapiro espouses, in

particular his assault on Eliot and Pound, two of the most notorious anti-Semites in twentieth-century Anglo-American letters, clearly reflect his Jewish sensibility.<sup>13</sup>

In "The Scapegoat of Modern Poetry," Shapiro enumerates his objections to Pound and Eliot.

Pound and Eliot meet on the grounds of Education, if that is the right term. They begin as students, one of Philosophy, the other of Romance literature. Both are poets and expatriates, anti-American and antidemocratic. The one becomes a monarchist, the other a Fascist. Both gravitate toward orthodoxy, the one toward a national church freighted with tradition; the other toward a ritualism of culture without religious sanction. Both construct theories of literature out of opposition to individualism, "freethinking" and what they label Romanticism. Both center their attention throughout their careers not on poetry or on belles-lettres nor on literature proper, but on the function of these things in a controlled society. As late as 1940 Pound and Eliot are worrying about the Ideal Curriculum to save civilization via the American university student.<sup>14</sup>

Shapiro criticizes Pound and Eliot for their failure to base their aesthetics on aesthetic grounds as well as for the content of their cultural visions. As an American Jew, of course, Shapiro clearly cannot accept the latter. With regards to the former point, Shapiro himself seems to be promoting a content-centered aesthetics in Poems of a Jew. Furthermore, one of his objections to awarding Pound the Bollingen Prize pointed to the moral necessity of weighing content equally with form in determining a poem's literary merit. Thus, Shapiro's criticism of Pound and Eliot for

using poetry (the pure aesthetic object) in the service of some cultural program could be equally directed toward his own work. This apparent inconsistency in Shapiro's thinking does not, however, invalidate his critique of Pound and Eliot. Rather, it may simply further reflect the turmoil in his life at the time.

Nonetheless, Shapiro's designation of William Carlos Williams as "The True Contemporary" on the grounds that Williams does indeed center his attention on poetry is consistent with the stance Shapiro takes in In Defense of Ignorance.

The radical difference between Williams and, say, Eliot, is that Williams divorces poetry from 'culture,' or tries to. Williams is fighting for the existence of poetry (while Eliot and Pound fought for the 'uses' of poetry). Williams' entire literary career has been dedicated to the struggle to preserve spontaneity and immediacy of experience.<sup>15</sup>

\* \* \* \* \*

I call him [Williams] the true contemporary because he saw the challenge from the beginning and saw it whole: to create American poetry out of nothing, out of that which had never lent itself to poetry before.<sup>16</sup>

Perhaps Shapiro's promotion of Williams was merely a matter of convenience, for at the time no one represented the antithesis of Pound and Eliot more than Williams. Perhaps there was an unconscious recognition of affiliation with Williams, the son of immigrants (including a mother who

was herself half-Jewish), a poet who seemed to succeed in making America his home, his linguistic, cultural, and intellectual home. Perhaps Shapiro recognized that only through Williams, who saw the challenge to create poetry out of nothing, could he hope to create a poetry in which the Jew was represented favorably. We can only speculate on the underlying causes of Shapiro's interest in Williams. Of one thing we can be certain, however: Shapiro never actually attempts to incorporate Williams's style into his own work. Thus there is some conflict at the time between the aesthetic position Shapiro articulates in prose and the aesthetic position he has practiced successfully in his poetry. The preposterous conclusion Shapiro draws while writing on Williams that "the iambic is not a language for the American poet," is further evidence that Shapiro, a master of meters, experienced a severe crisis during the decade and a half following the Second World War.<sup>17</sup>

Where In Defense of Ignorance is a boisterous and undisciplined response to Eliot, Pound, Williams and others in prose, Poems of a Jew is a subtle, sophisticated response in poetry to the two influential poets and the anti-Semitic strains in the English literary tradition. Rather than a mere recycling of poems written in the "old" style, the style of a man profoundly influenced by the English literary tradition, Poems of a Jew is a selected poems that highlights something that until its publication had always

been latent in Shapiro's work: in the new context the older poems can be seen to embody Shapiro's struggle to assimilate to and finally transform English literary tradition.

Indeed, as the book reveals, in the process of attempting to lose his Jewish identity in the English literary tradition, Shapiro actually discovers its centrality to his consciousness, his artistic consciousness. Thus, while in the late 1940s and 1950s Shapiro seriously entertains the thought of abandoning his literary heritage, it is that Gentile heritage that has given rise to one of Shapiro's greatest subjects, the subject of the Jew.

The artistic merit of the book lies not only in the quality of the individual poems themselves, many of which had already been praised for their artistry, but also for the arrangement of the poems into a loose structure which in and of itself is an integral part of the book's statement. The four-part structure includes an introduction and three sections of poetry. Karl Malkoff, one of Shapiro's most perceptive critics, was first to identify a structural significance to the book.

The first [section] seems largely concerned with symbols of the Jewish experience, frequently with art and language; the second specifically places Judaism within the context of a Christian world, a theme that is never far from the surface throughout the entire book; and the final section deals with archetypal figures, most of them Jewish, all in some way relevant to a consideration of Jewishness.<sup>18</sup>

I suggest the structure is more precise than Malkoff has noted. Part 1 reflects the historical experiences of the Jews, especially as victims of anti-Semitism. The historical event that radiates like black fire at the core of this section's poems is the Holocaust. "The Alphabet," "Israel," and "The Olive Tree," for instance, three of the poems with which the book begins, draw our attention directly to the Holocaust and the creation of the State of Israel, two intimately interrelated events. As the Holocaust had an indelible effect on Jewish life, so too these poems which open the book cast their shadows across the entire volume. Even the poems in this section written before the full news of the Holocaust had been disclosed, poems such as "University" and "Washington Cathedral," acquire a new and haunting poignancy when read in the context of that tragedy.

Part 2 is essentially personal, documenting various crises in an individual's life, which include private (as opposed to public, historical) encounters between the Christian and the Jew, and even the poet's own Jewish/Christian ambivalence. Part 3 centers on the representation and reinterpretation of archetypal characters, Biblical figures such as Moses and Adam and Eve, and literary figures such as Shylock and Faust.

Reading the book's structure alone, one gets the sense that the individual Jew is poised precariously between

history and mythology--a history which would defeat him, and a mythology which in its literary manifestation insists on representing him as a beast and in its Biblical manifestation sustains him in his suffering. But Shapiro does not leave the Jew there, trapped between two potentially devouring forces. Rather he acknowledges the tragedy that has befallen the Jew in history, he honors the Jewish dead in Part 1, he celebrates the small struggles of daily life in Part 2, and finally he returns the Jew to history, strengthened by Hebrew Scriptures.

Part 1 opens with "The Alphabet" (1954), collected here for the first time. This complicated, compressed poem tries to invoke in its 25 lines some of the darker moments in the history of anti-Semitism in language that ranges from symbolic to sarcastic, from mundane to visionary.

The letters of the Jews as strict as flames  
Or little terrible flowers lean  
Stubbornly upwards through the perfect ages  
Singing through solid stone the sacred names.  
(PJ,3)

In richly resonant language, the first quatrain describes Hebrew letters carved into headstones of the Jewish dead. One can never dissociate Hebrew from the quintessential Hebrew text, the Torah. Consequently, the stone on which sacred names are recorded is suggestive of the parchment on which the sacred history of the Jews is recorded. Despite its fragility, the Torah stubbornly

survives, this parchment Torah of life, this stone Torah of death.

Indeed, the history of the Jews can be read as a history of tragic life and death. Consequently, letters "as strict as flames" suggests at once the sacred fire which never exhausts the fuel that feeds it, as of, for instance, the burning bush, as well as the fires which have burned thousands of Torahs, in the recent and distant past. Furthermore, the Jewish people are inseparable from the Torah. When the Torah burns and is destroyed, the Jew burns and is destroyed. When the Torah survives as a strict and sacred flame, the Jew survives as a strict and sacred flame. Considering the date of its publication, 1954, the imagery, the hint of bitter irony in the phrase "perfect ages" (the Jews are stubborn survivors of all the "perfect ages" in which they were persecuted), there can be no mistaking the historical event which underlies this masterfully rendered passage.

The Jewish/Christian conflict comes to the foreground as the stanza continues.

The letters of the Jews are black and clean  
And lie in chain-line over Christian pages.  
The chosen letters bristle like barbed wire  
That hedge the flesh of man,  
Twisting and tightening the book that warns.

Ironically, Jewish barbed wire, reminiscent of the wire fences surrounding concentration camps, enchains Christian

pages. Ironically, the letters of the Jews have been expropriated by Christians and turned to life-denying rather than life-affirming purposes, destructive rather than creative ends. This ironic indictment of the Church represents the letters of the Jews, the Jews themselves, as victimizers, not victims, implying a Christian justification for hundreds of years of anti-Semitism. The stanza concludes with a paradoxical passage.<sup>19</sup>

These words, this burning bush, this flickering  
pyre  
Unsacrifices the bled son of man  
Yet plaits his crown of thorns.

The Torah, a mysterious symbol of life and death ("burning bush," "flickering pyre"), gives Christ, "son of man," not God, life. Christ, after all, was a Jew. But simultaneously, the Torah prepares Christ's crown of death. To this point in the poem, the difficult relationship between Judaism and Christianity--who is responsible for killing whom?--has been presented in tortuously compressed language. The poem suggests in its eschatological conclusion that, like the language which relaxes in the second and final stanza, the Jewish/Christian conflict will be resolved at the end of time.

These are the letters that all men refuse  
And will refuse until the king arrives  
And will refuse until the death of time  
And all is rolled back in the book of days.

This is at once a hopeful and desperate conclusion. As recent history has reminded Shapiro and Jews the world over, no matter how safe life appears, the Jew will never finally be secure in the diaspora. Still, according to Biblical prophecy the day will come when the Jew will no longer be refused, and the Torah will be accepted as the truth. While this poem could easily have been written at other periods in Jewish history, could perhaps have been written by a visionary American Jew in the 1920s or early 1930s, most American Jews would have remained willfully blind to this danger of Jewish life until the Holocaust intervened on their security.

The next poem, "Israel," offers an antidote to exile, though to the Westerner the establishment of the State of Israel offers only qualified relief. "When I think of the liberation of Palestine/ . . . My heart leaps forward like a hungry dog,/My heart is thrown back on its tangled chain,/My soul is hangdog in a Western chair." He desires "Palestine", but he's chained to his life in the West, in America. Shapiro is not the first Jewish poet to address the problem of dual loyalties. On the same subject, the twelfth-century Jewish-Spanish poet Judah Halevi wrote,

My heart is in the East and I am at the edge of the West. Then how can I taste what I eat, how can I enjoy it? How can I fulfill my vows and pledges while Zion is in the domain of Edom, and I am in the bounds of Arabia?<sup>20</sup>

Despite the physical and psychic imprisonment the diaspora Jew, chained or sunk in a Western chair, continues to suffer, he would like to believe that the birth of the Jewish State will mark the death of anti-Semitic myths, the end of Jewish persecution.

Speak of the tillage of a million heads  
No more. Speak of the evil myth no more  
Of one who harried Jesus on his way  
Saying, Go faster. Speak no more  
Of the yellow badge, secta nefaria.  
Speak the name only of the living land.

(PJ,4)

This hopeful conclusion echoes the messianic vision with which "The Alphabet" concludes. Both poems mourn and honor the Jewish dead, both offer solace to the living with the promise of a just future.

Though more mysterious than "The Alphabet" and "Israel," the third poem in the book, "The Dirty Word," a prose poem first published in 1942, symbolically continues Shapiro's confrontation with anti-Semitism. Like a bird, the dirty word "hops in the cage" of a boy's mind and, "with its vicious beak, ripping and chopping the flesh," feeds on the boy's brain (PJ,5). The boy grows into a man and dies, but the seemingly indestructible "bird outlives the man, being freed at the man's death-funeral by a word from the rabbi."

Indestructible, that is, until the first person narrator appears in the concluding paragraph of the poem (in

its final paragraph the poem shifts suddenly from third to first person). "But I one morning went upstairs and opened the door and entered the closet and found in the cage of my mind the great bird dead." The speaker mourns the bird's death and also salvages something from the bird: "[O]ut of the worn black feathers of the wing have I made pens to write these elegies, for I have outlived the bird, and I have murdered it in my early childhood."

The bird, the word that infects the speaker's mind, the pejorative "Jew," incites a heroic action. The speaker of the poem will no longer remain a passive victim, subjected to the slanderous term "Jew" spit at him by anti-Semitic neighbors. The degrading word also inspires "these elegies," these poems dedicated finally to all who suffer from anti-Semitism, perpetrators and victims alike.

The first three poems--"The Alphabet," "Israel," "The Dirty Word"--follow similar structural patterns. Each poem begins with a birth or genesis experience ("The letters of the Jews,"<sup>21</sup> "the liberation of Palestine," "The dirty word hops in the cage of the mind . . . [of a] small boy"), proceeds to a death experience ("the still speaking embers of ghettos," "the tillage of a million heads," "the great bird dead") and concludes with an experience of survival, redemption or resurrection ("until the king arrives," "the living land," "I have outlived the bird"). This pattern--birth, death, resurrection--sounds typically Christian. And

yet, the pattern also accurately reflects the historical experience underlying the poems: the birth of the Jewish people, the near destruction of that people, and Jewish renewal through the redemption of Israel.

At least two poems in Part 1, "University" and "Washington Cathedral," address subjects far removed from the Holocaust. "University" is Shapiro's celebrated attack on the elitist (and racist and anti-Semitic) University of Virginia. "Washington Cathedral" describes a tourist's visit to a church in the nation's capitol. Both poems, however, set in this new context, resonate with the same themes, the same complaints as those poems which do address the subject of the Holocaust.

"University," for instance, begins, "To hurt the Negro and avoid the Jew/Is the curriculum (PJ,12)." Architecturally, the campus is built "of mannered brick" and "columns with imperious stance." The buildings themselves "eye" the "outlanders," the "entering boys," the new students who have yet to learn the manners of this Southern place. To succeed here, one must assimilate, one must "practice a face" and even perhaps change one's name: "The Deans, dry spinsters over family plate,/Ring out the English name like coin." This seems like a modest compromise when compared to the German methods of purifying their nation. And yet to Shapiro changing a name is almost equivalent to extermination.<sup>22</sup>

Like "University," "Washington Cathedral" was first published in Person, Place and Thing. Moved by its architectural splendor as well as its relics--"his heart . . . aches with history and astonishment"--the tourist who is the subject of the poem offers a donation to the church: "He gives a large coin to a wooden coffer" (PJ,14). Similarly, when he leaves the church and returns to the capitol's streets he pays his dues to the country: "he votes again." The poem concludes, "This church and city triumph in his eyes./He is only a good alien, nominally happy" (PJ,15). While there is no explicit indication of the tourist's ethnicity or religion, the context makes him a Jew, an alien who submits to the law (political, religious) of the land: "The church and city triumph."

"University" and "Washington Cathedral" are the poems of subtle extermination. In both poems, the Jew is the "outlander," the "alien," confronting the pressure to transfigure himself according to the demands of the host culture. Only Christianized, Anglicized or Americanized could the outsider fulfill his civic, national or spiritual duties. Nevertheless, the Jew understands that he can never be more than a "good alien, nominally happy." "As everyone knows," Shapiro writes in the introduction to Poems of a Jew, "a Jew who becomes an atheist remains a Jew. A Jew who becomes a Catholic remains a Jew" (PJ,ix). A nominal expression of allegiance to church and state does not ensure

full citizenship. As Shapiro knows, there are profound limits to assimilation.

"Travelogue for Exiles," also in Part 1, expresses the exile's plight in a manner which also recognizes the impossibility of assimilation.

#### Travelogue for Exiles

Look and remember. Look upon this sky;  
 Look deep and deep into the sea-clean air,  
 The unconfined, the terminus of prayer.  
 Speak now and speak into the hallowed dome.  
 What do you hear? What does the sky reply?  
The heavens are taken: this is not your home.

Look and remember. Look upon this sea;  
 Look down and down into the tireless tide.  
 What of a life below, a life inside,  
 A tomb, a cradle in the curly foam?  
 The waves arise; sea-wind and sea agree  
The waters are taken; this is not your home.

Look and remember. Look upon this land,  
 Far, far across the factories and the grass.  
 Surely, there, surely, they will let you pass.  
 Speak then and ask the forest and the loam.  
 What do you hear? What does the land command?  
The earth is taken; this is not your home.

(PJ,18)

Simple, orderly, direct, "Travelogue for Exiles" requires little or no explication at all. Its pleasures, however sad, derive equally from its formal accomplishments and its content. Each stanza begins with a promise: Look at this, look at that, look at the other thing. The stanzas each conclude with the unapologetic withdrawal of the promise. Who would tease exiles with such vindictive behavior? But the voice, the omniscient voice of the poem

sounds not malicious, but seductively calm as it makes its pronouncements. So whose voice is this, God's? After all, God's is the omniscient voice that commands: let there be light ("look and remember"). And were it not for the "factories" in the final stanza, this travelogue could just as easily have been addressed to Adam and Eve as to more modern exiles. Finally, it is the voice's anonymity that makes "Travelogue for Exiles" a powerful poem. For these pronouncements, spoken by a faceless, unidentifiable, unattributable source, are even less negotiable than if they could be attributed to a source, even God (both Abraham and Moses negotiated successfully with a merciful God). Though this poem, originally printed in Person, Place and Thing, is not tied to a specific historical moment, in its current context it speaks poignantly of the Jewish experience in, say, Germany: that country offered the Jews the opportunity to assimilate and then reminded the Jews, as it were, that Germany was taken, Germany and Eastern Europe were not their home.

Shapiro's success in dispassionately recording one of the stark truths of Jewish life in exile is in part a result of his ability to surrender powerful and perhaps distorting feelings and to submit himself to the discipline of a sophisticatedly simple form. In its coolness and detachedness "Travelogue for Exiles" represents one end of a scale of responses to the Holocaust, whereas a poem such as

"Israel" represents the other, impassioned end. Part 1 concludes with a failed Miltonic sonnet, "Lord, I Have Seen Too Much," worth mentioning only in that its sentiment reflects the state of utter despair over the prospects of Jewish life to which the poet has fallen.

Too suddenly this lightning is disclosed:  
 Lord, in a day the vacuum of Hell,  
 The mouth of blood, the ocean's ragged jaw,  
 More than embittered Adam ever saw  
 When driven from Eden to the East to dwell,  
 The lust of godhead hideously exposed!

(PJ,19)

Despite Part 1's conclusion--there is no place for the Jew in this world--these are finally not the poems of despondence and unredeemable despair, but rather elegiac poems that witness the horror and pay tribute to the dead in a manner that will hopefully enable the living Jew to renew his commitment to a world that wishes to exclude him. "Now on the lawn/The olives fall by thousands," Shapiro writes in "The Olive Tree," speaking allegorically of the Jewish victims of the Holocaust. He continues,

. . . and I delight  
 To shed my tennis shoes and walk on them,  
 Pressing them coldly into the deep grass,  
 In love and reverence for the total loss.

(PJ,7)

Whereas Part 1 can be regarded as a long elegy for the vanquished, a burial of the dead, Part 2 returns us to the heart of life, to the experiences of childhood and youth, to

the transformative moments in the individual's life. "The Confirmation," published first in 1941, presents two dramatic events in a boy's life which occur within hours of one another: on Saturday night a boy is wakened by a sexual dream and masturbates; on Sunday morning the boy takes his confirmation in church. Not surprisingly, Shapiro does not condemn the Saturday night sexual initiation. On the contrary, the abundance of sexual symbolism and the plot seem designed to highlight the religious nature of sexual experience, the sexual nature of religious experience. In the third stanza, for instance, Shapiro sanctifies the boy's masturbation with a religious conceit.

And to confirm his sex, breathless and white  
 With Benediction self-bestowed he knelt  
 Oh tightly married to his childish grip,  
 And unction smooth as holy-oil  
 Fell from the vessel's level lip  
 Upon the altar cloth;  
 Like Easter boys the blood sang in his head  
 And all night long the tallow beads  
 Like tears dried in the bed. (PJ, 25)

The light-heartedness of the first 3 stanzas continues in the final stanza and helps to undercut somewhat the sermonizing with which the poem concludes.

Come from the church, you parents and you girls.  
 And walk with kisses and with happy jokes  
 Beside this man. Be doubly proud, you priest,  
 Once for his passion in the rose,  
 Once for his body self-released;  
 And speak aloud of her  
 Who in the perfect consciousness of joy  
 Stood naked in the electric light  
 And woke the hidden boy. (PJ, 26)

This sentimental portrait of a boy's initiation--religious, sexual--invites parents, girls, readers to partake in a double pleasure. The sensuality of church imagery complements the sexuality of the boy's midnight dream. The tensions between priest and boy, parents and child that could have dominated the conclusion of this poem are swept aside by the celebratory and didactic voice of the speaker. But for all its bravado, the poem establishes no clear connection to the subject of the Jew, not, at least, until it is read in conjunction with its companion piece, "The First Time."

Published 16 years after "The Confirmation" (1957), "The First Time," uses some of the same rhetorical effects as its predecessor, but here the effects, marshalled with great skill and control, move the poem to a shocking and profound conclusion. The atmosphere in "The Confirmation" is inviting, seductive. Safe in his bedroom the boy awakes and observes through the bedroom window how "the moon shone in the yard/On hairy hollyhocks erect/And buds of roses pink and hard/And on the solid wall/A square of light like movies fell (PJ,25)." The atmosphere in "The First Time," by contrast, is medicinal, anesthetic, even frightening.

Behind shut doors, in shadowy quarantine,  
There shines the lamp of iodine and rose  
That stains all love with its medicinal bloom.  
(PJ,28)

Similar to "The Confirmation" in which sex and faith in God are united by the act of confirmation, this poem cleverly joins passion to the anesthetization of passion in a single act. The "lamp" is of "iodine" (medicinal) and "rose" (romantic/sensual). Its light "stains all love" like iodine, like sin, "with its medicinal bloom," its healing rose. For all its evocative, "shadowy" promises in the first three lines, the stanza concludes with a surprisingly dramatic shift to a plain, direct, and by comparison understated style.

This boy, who is no more than seventeen,  
Not knowing what to do, takes off his clothes  
As one might in a doctor's anteroom.

The plainness of lines 4-6 anesthetizes the "passionate" rhetoric in lines 1-3. Thus in its first stanza alone, the poem exhibits a wider range of diction, a more deft control of tone than "The Confirmation."

The next stanza returns to symbolic language.

Then in a cross-draft of fear and shame  
Feels love hysterically burn away,  
A candle swimming down to nothingness  
Put out by its own wetted gusts of flame  
And he stands smooth as uncarved ivory  
Heavily curved for some expert caress.  
(PJ, 28)

The boy's loss of erection is represented in dream-like language, a reflection of the seductively mysterious quality

of his first visit to a prostitute. Equally lush and unreal is the prostitute's bedroom "where chairs twist with dragons from the floor/And the great bed drugged with its own perfume/Spreads its carnivorous flower-mouth for all."

Besides the further development of the medicinal/floral configuration, it is important to note the word on which the stanza concludes: "all." It seems a slight, merely descriptive moment in passing. The prostitute serves "all" men in an undiscriminating fashion. Yet it is precisely this word that prepares us for the shock of the poem's conclusion.

In the penultimate stanza, the boy meets the girl of his dreams.

The girl is sitting with her back to him;  
 She wears a black thing and she rakes her hair,  
 Hauling her round face upward like moonrise;  
 She is younger than he, her angled arms are slim  
 And like a country girl her feet are bare.  
 (PJ, 29)

Again the poem returns to plain diction, with only a minimal touch of figurative flair: "Hauling her round face upward like moonrise."

The poem concludes, picking up from the last line of stanza five.

She watches him behind her with old eyes,  
 Transfixing him in space like some grotesque,  
 Far, far from her where he is still alone  
 And being here is more and more untrue.  
 Then she turns round, as one turns at a desk,

And looks at him, too naked and too soon,  
And almost gently asks: Are you a Jew?

How bureaucratic! The clerk turns around at her desk and coolly begins interviewing her client! The distinction between "all" and "Jew" has become too painfully clear. In this moment of vulnerability, this instant of initiation, the boy desires nothing less than to affirm, to confirm his "essential" identity. He has come to the prostitute to prove himself, to make himself a Man, to behave like "all" men behave. He desires normality, not abnormality, in his sexual performance; he would prefer to confirm his sexual ordinariness, not extraordinariness.<sup>23</sup> Instead he is confronted with his distinctiveness, his tattoo, his inescapable brand, his Jewish essence, his circumcised penis. In a world of men, he is a Jew. If he forgets this, there will always be someone to remind him, "almost gently" (gentile-ly) of his "true" nature.<sup>24</sup>

Once this classic model (Man/Jew) has been identified, other anti-Semitic strains in the metaphoric motif become clear. For instance, the prostitute watches the boy behind her "with old eyes." The comic and ironic effects aside, this phrase also invokes the long history of anti-Semitism through which she gazes at him. The medicinal metaphors as well suggest, however remotely, an anti-Semitic motive. In the aggregate images such as "quarantine," "iodine," "doctor's anteroom," "bed drugged" convey a dual sense of

the potentially contagious nature and the sterility of the encounter between young man and prostitute. But latent in these images is the implication that the Jew is the most contagious of men, a familiar anti-Semitic myth originating during the middle ages; therefore, extraordinary precautions are necessary to protect oneself from him.<sup>25</sup>

In "The Confirmation" the speaker imposes his values on priest, parents, girls and boy, arguing finally for the sexual nature of religious experience. "The First Time" concludes without the intervention of a speaker imposing a resolution on the poem. In part the poem's success lies precisely in its willingness to conclude with no more resolution than a painful mutual recognition: the boy sees a girl in "a black thing" who "rakes her hair;" she sees a "Jew." The poem moves from fantasy to reality, from exotic to plain diction, from universality (prostitute and man) to particularity (girl and Jew), disconcerting particularity.

The two poems record the encounter between sexuality, experienced in a private domain, and religion or religious identity, experienced in the public domain. "The Confirmation" argues for public acceptance of the positive value of a boy's intimate, personal life. Though the poem was likely composed on one of those days he was writing as a Christian, the paradigmatic experience in the poem is the same as that found in Shapiro's more explicitly Jewish poems: an outsider (the confirmand who remains alien because

of having masturbated) seeks acceptance by a majority, host culture (church, family, friends). "The First Time," too, records the interaction between an outsider (Jew) and a host culture (Gentile, woman) as well as the unlikelihood of the Jew's ever overcoming his difference. This is the truth at the center of Poems of a Jew.

The individual's encounter with an exclusive culture, a culture from which the individual will always be to some extent excluded, is repeated again and again in the poems in Part 2. Largely absent from the poems in Part 2 is the historical context that figures so prominently in Part 1. Often the alien individual, rejected by the host culture, experiences a sense of psychic incompleteness, psychic mutilation. To compensate for this, the individual can develop a belief in "the wholeness even of the mutilated." This indeed is the subject of "The Leg," a war poem included in Part 2, which, without Shapiro's instructive note, would seem to have little to do with the subject of the Jew.

Freud speaks (it may be all too often) of "violent defloration" and "the fear of being eaten by the Father." In Freud's view, as in that of every Jew, mutilation, circumcision, and "the fear of being eaten" are all one. The Leg is a poem written during war and its subject is the wholeness even of the mutilated.

(PJ,70)

In the poem, the amputee's path to wholeness begins with a concentration on the body itself.

. . . as if deliberately, his fingers  
 Begin to explore the stump. He learns a shape  
 That is comfortable and tucked in like a sock.  
 This has a sense of humor, this can despise  
 The finest surgical limb, the dignity of limping,  
 The nonsense of wheel chairs. Now he smiles to  
 the wall:

The amputation has become an acquisition.  
 (PJ,32)

The amputation has become an acquisition, the loss a gain.  
 The wounded soldier goes on to fantasize "the mind of the  
 leg."

For the leg is wondering where he is (all is not  
 lost)  
 And surely he has a duty to the leg;  
 He is its injury, the leg is his orphan,  
 He must articulate the mind of the leg,  
 Pray for the part that is missing  
 (PJ,32)

Rather than seeking spiritual compensation for his loss, the soldier repeatedly insists on limiting his identity to a sense of his physicality: he tries to maintain a sense of physical wholeness through imagining the life of the missing leg. As Malkoff explains, "The expected means of reconciliation would, for most readers, involve a rejection of the primacy of the body; but Shapiro frustrates this expectation by insisting all the more upon the body's importance, and finding his consolation therein."<sup>26</sup>

Still, with all its insistence on the body, the poem turns in its final, prayer-like stanza to spiritual speculation.

The body, what is it, Father, but a sign  
To love the force that grows us, to give back  
What in Thy palm is senselessness and mud?  
Knead, knead the substance of our understanding  
Which must be beautiful in flesh to walk,      That  
if thou take me angrily in hand  
And hurl me to the shark, I shall not die!  
(PJ,33)

This stanza continues to grant primacy to the body: "understanding" has "substance" and expresses its beauty "in flesh." Even the first person speaker who emerges suddenly in the final stanza can accept physical mutilation provided he is spared his life: I'm willing to be maimed, mutilated for my transgressions ("if thou take me angrily in hand"), but I don't want to die. But the body is also regarded as a "sign," the value of which resides not in its own substance but in what it points to, something incorporeal, the force which comes from God. Shapiro appears to want it both ways: the body is primary, the soul is primary. But, finally, the subject of the soul could only be introduced once the body, the mutilated body, had been fully accepted. Indeed, the conclusions of the penultimate and final stanzas stand in sharp contrast to one another. Stanza four concludes, "after a while it [the leg] will die quietly." Stanza five concludes "I shall not die." Thus the poem is careful to distinguish between an object ("it") and a subject ("I"), between an expendable limb and an inexpendable essence, between body and soul.

The poem's apparent statement of belief in the eternal soul--"if Thou take me angrily in hand/And hurl me to the shark, I shall not die!"--is undercut by the passion of that final plea, "I shall not die," which articulates a desperate attachment to the life of the body, the only life there is. As elsewhere in Part 2 Shapiro represents the body as the center of cultural and personal conflict, here the body is regarded as something to be given back to the Father, the force that grows us, the ultimate source of identity, and it is regarded as the source of one's living identity, the only identity that matters. To deny one's body, circumcised, mutilated or disfigured in any way, is to deny the essence of one's identity. For the soldier this means accepting his "wholeness," accepting the fact that he has been hurled to the shark and he has not died, despite having lost a leg; for the Jew in "The First Time" it means accepting his manliness despite his circumcision, accepting the fact that he too has been hurled to the shark, to the rabbi "with a blade," and has survived as a Jewish male: his body is his identity.

As Part 1 concluded with a sort of summary poem, "Lord, I Have Seen Too Much," Part 2 concludes with "The Crucifix in the Filing Cabinet," a poem which expresses Shapiro's cynical views of the Christian and Jewish religions. Set not in the bedroom, bordello or hospital room but the office, the poem's simple plot is, frankly, incredible. The

speaker reaches into a filing cabinet, finds a "crucifix" and a tfillin (phylactery) bag, places the crucifix into the tfillin bag and presumably returns them to the filing cabinet. Shapiro uses these convenient props to arrive at his hope (implied) for a future in which Christianity and Judaism will no longer tangle with one another.

Shapiro's irreverence has ample opportunity to express itself in this poem. "Out of the filing cabinet of true steel," the poem begins, ironically suggesting that the steel filing cabinet is the repository of truth in this office (PJ,46). Indeed, the cabinet "saves from fire my rags of letters, bills,/ Manuscripts, contracts" and "all the trash of praise." Shapiro can afford to scorn literary fame: he has already won the Pulitzer Prize and served as Poetry Consultant to the Library of Congress as well as the editor of Poetry. He also seems determined to undercut any melancholic, plaintive, hopeful echoes of Whitman ("out of the cradle," "out of the filing cabinet," "out of the drawer") with bitter sarcasm.

Having found the crucifix amidst his papers, the speaker turns his irreverence from the literary to the religious kingdom.

It [the crucifix] formed a pile [in his palm]  
Like a small mound of stones on which there  
stands  
A tree crazy with age, and on the tree  
Some ancient teacher hanging by his hands.  
(PJ,46)

His jabs at Christianity--its symbol, "a tree crazy with age"; its leader, "some ancient teacher"--seem even sharper when contrasted to his sentimental remarks about Judaism.

I found a velvet bag sewn by the Jews  
For holy shawls and frontlets and soft thongs  
That bind the arm at morning for great wrongs  
Done in a Pharoah's time.

(PJ,46)

The phylacteries, leather straps with which devout Jews bind themselves daily in morning prayer, serve, among other things, as a daily memorial to Jewish enslavement in Egypt.

Finally, the poem concludes with Shapiro's hope for the future.

#### The crucifix

I dropped down in the darkness of this pouch,  
Thought tangled with thought and chain with  
chain,  
Till time untie the dark with greedy look,  
Crumble the cross and bleed the leathery vein.

(PJ,46)

The note this poem resolves on is that Christianity and Judaism are equally undesirable, they are equally responsible for the great story, the great tragedy of Western civilization, for which they deserve to be hidden away in a filing cabinet and forgotten until they crumble and bleed to death. The act of tucking crucifix and tfillin bag back in the filing cabinet clearly is intended to resonate with grand symbolic significance. It doesn't. In

the previous poems the Gentile/Jewish conflict was represented in encounters between an individual and an institution, an individual and another individual, and an individual and God. Here the conflict is expressed in an individual's encounter with religious symbols, symbols that Shapiro is unable to invest with the kind of meaning necessary to evoke a strong emotional reaction from readers.

In a sense, "The Crucifix in the Filing Cabinet" is one of the most mundane poems in Part 2, documenting an anecdote from one man's day at the office. The poems in Part 3 move from the personal to the archetypal, from the mundane to the mythological, from the prosaic to the Biblical. The early sonnet (1944) "Jew," distinguishes between the immortal, immutable name "Jew," and thereby the language of the Jews, and the mortal, mutable Jewish person, "a nose that can change in the weathers of time or persist/Or die out in confusion or model itself on the best" (PJ,50). The enemies of the Jews come from within the Jewish community and without: Jew is the "word for the murder of God"; that word will "cry out on the air/Though the race is no more and the temples are closed of our will [emphasis added]."

The twelve-line argument is compressed into the concluding couplet.

Our name is impaled in the heart of the world on a  
hill  
Where we suffer to die by the hands of ourselves,  
and to kill.

(PJ,50)

As Christ is "impaled in the heart of the world," the Jew is impaled on that cross, not once in the past but in the continuously unfolding present ("is" not "was"). Again the argument is made that the Jew is persecuted and persecutor: according to the myth the Jews killed Christ and in so doing killed any hopes that they would ever be treated as equals in a Christian society. Though the poem is seriously flawed--by the deadly regular anapestic line as well as by the expendable couplet, for instance--it struggles to provide a complex portrait of the Jew, a character who has been often misrepresented as a stick-figure enemy in other literary works.

Based on Freud's Moses and Monotheism, "The Murder of Moses," also first published in 1944, offers a much more complete psychological and emotional portrait of the Jews as a people full of fear, rage, jealousy, remorse, love, respect, devotion--in short, a people fully human. The narrative recounts the Exodus from Egypt, from the point of view of the Israelites, and culminates in the Israelites's admission that it was they who murdered Moses. The poem begins by expressing the Israelites's reluctance to follow Moses out of Egypt and their subsequent skepticism regarding Moses's powers.

By reason of despair we set forth behind you  
And followed the pillar of fire like a doubt,  
To hold to belief wanted a sign,

Called the miracle of the staff and the plagues  
Natural phenomena.

(PJ, 53)

Despair and doubt plague the Israelites in this swiftly moving passage of simple diction and lively syntax. The natural fears of leaving a familiar setting (Egypt) and being captured again and crushed under "Pharaoh's wheels" are expressed, as is a strong suspicion of Moses's character itself.

You always went alone, a little ahead,  
Prophecy disturbed you, you were not a fanatic.  
The women said you were meek, the men  
Regarded you as a typical leader.  
You and your black wife might have been  
foreigners.

We even discussed your parentage, were you really  
a Jew?

Their attitude toward Moses can be summed up in the best line of the poem.

We hated you daily. Our children died. The water spilled.

In these three declarative statements, Shapiro is at his best: restrained, clear, direct. There is no overwriting here, no language compressed to the point of distracting ambiguity. Even the watermark of the period, the irony, is pleasantly absent. The line is also psychologically revealing, particularly when contrasted with the Israelites' confession to their crime.

At the end of it all we gave you the gift of death.

(PJ,54)

The Murder of Moses. The gift of death. These two phrases articulate two distinct voices. The former, the bold voice of the title, represents the author's Freudian interpretation of these Biblical events. It was necessary for the Jews to murder their father, Moses, in order to mature, to take his place, to become a race. The latter, the voice of the Israelites, is a justification, a denial, a way of protecting themselves from the truth that they were responsible for their leader's death, that they had broken the sixth commandment. In its boldness, frankness, directness, "The Murder of Moses" resembles most clearly the voice that says, "We hated you daily. Our children died. The water spilled." Only at the point of facing up to their most serious crime, more serious even than idol worship, which they had last practiced just prior to receiving the commandments which forbade it, do the Israelites weaken and speak in sheltering figurative language. Lest the poem end here, leaving the readers with a perception of the Israelites as liars, masters in the art of self-deception, the poem continues for one more summary stanza.

Though you were mortal and once committed murder  
You assumed the burden of the covenant  
Spoke for the world and for our understanding.  
Converse with God made you a thinker,  
Taught us all early justice, made us a race.

This characteristically moralizing final stanza introduces a new element into the poem, time. Prior to this the poem seemed set entirely in the Biblical past. The title and notes to the poem provide, of course, a modern interpretive framework for our reading. But the final stanza bridges the gap between the Biblical past and the present, implying from within the body of the poem itself the relevance of the Moses story--a paradigm of the psychological conflict with Jewish leaders necessary for Jewish growth--to contemporary Jewry. This is Shapiro's self-conscious method of insisting on the importance of reclaiming the Biblical past through reinterpretation as a means of ensuring Jewish survival.

In "Adam and Eve," Shapiro again takes a Biblical subject and approaches it through a Jewish viewpoint: "The viewpoint of the sequence, that man is for the world, not for the afterworld, is Jewish" (PJ,71). Not only is this the theme of "Adam and Eve," it is the theme which unifies Poems of a Jew. In addition to the "Book of Genesis," Shapiro draws heavily on at least two interpretive sources, "the Zohar or central work of the cabala," and "the renegade Freudian, Wilhelm Reich" (PJ,71). The titles of the individual poems within the sequence reveal the psychoanalytic and sexual slant to the material: "The Sickness of Adam," "The Recognition of Eve," "The Kiss," "The Tree of Guilt," "The Confession," "Shame," "Exile."

The titles themselves suggest the stages of a psychic journey which on the surface seems to lead not from sickness to health but from sickness to sickness: separation, alienation and exile. But as it applies to Shapiro's understanding of Jewish experience, this exile constitutes leaving an idyllic, imaginary, impossible world (Eden, Paradise) for a realistic, material, imperfect, troubled, dangerous world.

It is in fact the tension between the imaginary and the realistic that troubles Adam from the beginning. After having discovered every path in this first garden, after having praised "the nature of things," Adam grows bored with the world outside him and eventually becomes aware of the world in his mind.

Thinking became a garden of its own.

In it were new things: words he had never said,  
Beasts he had never seen and knew were not  
In the true garden

(PJ,62)

After discovering his imagination, he develops a sharp sense of self-consciousness, through which, finally, he discovers even more new emotions: anger, wanderlust, longing. Then comes Eve.

Her sigh awakened him. He turned and saw  
A body swollen, as though formed of fruits  
White as the flesh of fishes, soft and raw.  
He hoped she was another of the brutes

(PJ,64)

At first he regards her as if she were another, until then, undiscovered member of the "true garden" he had come to know so well.

when she spoke the first word (it was thou)  
He was terror stricken, but she raised her hand  
And touched his wound where it was fading now,  
For he must feel the place to understand.  
Then he recalled the longing that had torn  
His side, and while he watched it whitely mend,  
He felt it stab him suddenly like a thorn.

He thought the woman had hurt him. Was it she  
Or the same sickness seeking to return;  
Or was there any difference, the pain set free  
And she who seized him now as hard as iron?  
Her fingers bit his body.

(PJ, 64)

Adam's sickness began with self-recognition; it grows with the recognition of the other, a convenient figure on which to place the blame for his sickness. Then he is initiated into the complex world of love. The couple discovers kissing almost by accident. "The first kiss was with stumbling fingertips./Their bodies grazed each other as if by chance. . . ." The second kiss was with the lips. Before the third, something happens that triggers Adam's fear, his deep insecurity that he might lose Eve.

Some obscure angel, pausing on his course,  
Shed such a brightness on the face of Eve,  
That Adam in grief was ready to believe  
He had lost her love. The third kiss was by force. (PJ, 65)

Indeed, Adam's premonitions are correct: he will, in a manner of speaking, soon lose her.

At the Tree of Guilt, Eve encounters the serpent, "the great power of the tree," and has her second taste, a vision actually, of sex. Startled by the sight for which she had prayed--the snake risen from the tree and pointing "at her loins"--

She fell and hid her face and still she saw  
 The spirit of the tree emerge and slip  
 Into the open sky until it stood  
 Straight as a standing stone, and spilled its  
 seed.

(PJ,66)

Once again the motif of the garden in the mind appears.

the woman lay  
 Stricken with what she knew, ripe in her thought  
 Like a fresh apple fallen from the limb  
 And rotten, like a fruit that lies too long.

Knowledge is the affliction, a familiar theme from "Genesis," and this knowledge, this sexual knowledge is paradoxically at once ripe and rotten, a blessing and a curse.

Eve's confession to Adam--"Under the tree I took the fruit of truth/From an angel. I ate it with my other mouth"--an unwitting lie ("She did not know she lied"), arouses him to the fullest and triggers an almost animalistic response.

fiery and aroused,  
 [the man] fell on her face to slake his terrible  
 thirst  
 And bore her body earthward like a beast.  
 (PJ,67)

For having "tasted this fruit," Adam and Eve are rewarded . . . with shame and exile. But how to teach them shame?

By marring the image, by the black device  
Of the goat-god, by the clown of Paradise,  
By fruits of cloth and by the navel's bud,  
By itching tendrils and by strings of blood,  
By ugliness, by the shadow of our fear,  
By ridicule, by the fig-leaf patch of hair.

(PJ,68)

This command is executed while the lovers sleep. Then they awaken.

They awoke and saw the covering that reveals.  
They thought they were changing into animals.  
Like animals they bellowed terrible cries  
And clutched each other, hiding each other's eyes.

They have been reduced to shame, they are too ashamed even to look at one another.

As they begin their departure from the garden, they first walk "angrily, slowly . . . like exiled kings," but then "like peasants, pitiful and strong, [they] take the first step toward earth and hesitate." From kings to peasants. Before taking the final steps of departure, Adam calls to his "Father."

give us your hand for our descent.  
Needing us greatly, even in our disgrace,  
Guide us, for gladly do we leave this place  
For our own land and wished for banishment.

(PJ,69)

Adam, surprisingly, seems to desire exile. Eve, on the other hand, endowed with the "opposite nature" of the Father, has another desire: "Guide us to Paradise." Finally, "a slow half-dozen steps across the stone," Adam and Eve, "called by name" by an angel, "turned and beheld"

Eden ablaze with fires of red and gold,  
The garden dressed for dying in cold flame,  
And it was autumn, and the present world.

Unlike the "Murder of Moses," this poem concludes without a summary stanza. In a word it spans human history from its mythological beginnings to the "present," this without explicit moral comment. The present time, according to this myth, is perpetually autumn, perpetually fall.

We know what the "present world" has to offer. As Adam and Eve "turned in dark amazement" to witness Eden burning, we look back over our shoulders at the beginning of the world of this book where we see the "flames," the "barbed wire," "the still speaking embers of ghettos"--Eastern European Jewry burning in "The Alphabet." Shapiro has chosen to end his book at the beginning. He leaves us with a story of our archetypal Mother and Father stepping out of their world into ours. In returning to, reclaiming, rewriting his Jewish past, Shapiro participates in a long tradition of reinterpreting Judaism in the light of changing social, historical, political, cultural conditions. For the

long night which has preceded this book, Shapiro has been troubled by the representation of the Jew in Western literature as well as by the status of the Jew in Western civilization. Indeed, his concerns for the Jew in the world of literature and the Jew in the world are inseparable. As the book itself suggests, banishment is not banishment, exile not exile. The Jew belongs in this world, not the next; on the earth, not in Paradise. Poems of a Jew, a first-rate artistic accomplishment, represents Shapiro's Jewish commitment to repairing this broken world.

At the time of its publication, Poems of a Jew was not well received. Many of the reviews centered more on the reviewer's mistrust of Shapiro's sincerity as a Jew than on the quality of the work. Leslie Fiedler charged Shapiro with capitalizing on the recently wakened interest in Jewish literature.<sup>27</sup> "We live in a time when everywhere in the realm of prose Jewish writers have discovered their Jewishness to be an eminently marketable commodity, their much vaunted alienation to be their passport into the heart of Gentile culture."<sup>28</sup> Fiedler also felt compelled to remind readers of Shapiro's "unconsummated adulterous affair with the Catholic Church."<sup>29</sup> Fiedler writes, "Indeed Shapiro's very conception of the Jew is a Christian one once removed, his reaction to the reflection in the Gentile's eyes which he yet accepts as a fact."<sup>30</sup> Despite his reservations and complaint that all the poems in the book

are recycled, freshened only slightly by a new context, Fiedler is able to attribute to Shapiro a particularly poignant perception of the American Jew's self-concept in the mid-twentieth century.

[F]or most moderns, Jewishness is an awareness not of belonging but of galuth, of exile or alienation. It is Shapiro's special triumph as a Jew and a poet to have defined galuth in its mid-twentieth century American form: the moment of awareness in which Bleistein realizes that he is still Shylock after all, and the second- or third-generation American that he is as alien as his remotest ancestor.<sup>31</sup>

Another reviewer, Paul Lauter, echoes Fiedler's concern that Shapiro's definition of Jew is essentially Sartrean: the Jew is a reflection of non-Jewish attitudes.<sup>32</sup> This leads the reviewer to his strongest attack: "Shapiro's Jew is not fully enough Jew to be a man."<sup>33</sup> Both Fiedler's and Lauter's comments reveal more about their own discomforts around the subject of the Jew (I do not know if Lauter is Jewish) than they do about the quality of Shapiro's work. Sartre's definition of Jew was indeed influential during the period in which Poems of a Jew was published. For many intellectuals and writers at the time Sartre's definition provided a useful starting point for clarifying one's Jewish identity during the difficult post-Holocaust years. And Shapiro was quite open about his flirtations with the Church; furthermore, Jewish ambivalence then, as now, is a

central characteristic of twentieth-century Jewish-American life.

Of course, I do not stand alone in recognizing the significance of Shapiro's contribution to the development of American-Jewish poetry. In 1973 Karl Malkoff, for instance, gives the book the kind of intelligent and informed criticism it deserves, exploring both its position within the modernist tradition in poetry as well as its contribution to American-Jewish literature.

Shapiro demonstrated as much courage in publishing Poems of a Jew as he did when he took his stance on the Bollingen Committee. With this book he hoped to carve out a new audience for himself; he hoped to create a new, truthful image of the Jew in Western literature; he hoped to increase understanding among non-Jews of Jewish life in the twentieth-century; he hoped to contribute to Jewish survival. It is virtually impossible to measure his failure or success. The book, long out of print, has yet to inspire a substantial body of Jewish-centered writing in mainstream American poetry. Nonetheless, it stands as a landmark achievement, and should a Jewish renaissance in American poetry occur, as I believe it will, Poems of a Jew will become one of the central texts to which all American-Jewish poets will have to pay homage.

Notes

1. Karl Shapiro, Poems of a Jew (New York: Random House, 1958), p. ix.
2. Karl Shapiro, Person, Place and Thing (Cornwall, N. Y.: Reynal & Hitchcock, 1942), p. 18.
3. Karl Shapiro, Trial of a Poet (New York: Reynal & Hitchcock, 1947), p. 36.
4. Karl Shapiro, V-Letter and Other Poems (New York: Reynal & Hitchcock, 1944), p. vi.
5. Karl Shapiro, respondent in "The Question of the Pound Award," Partisan Review 16, No. 5 (1949), p. 518.
6. Robert Phillips, "The Art of Poetry XXXVI: Karl Shapiro," Paris Review 28, No. 99 (1986), pp. 198-199.
7. Praising Shapiro's first book, Delmore Schwartz notes that Shapiro takes "the style of Auden and transform[s] it with an American subject matter, by writing of drugstores, lunch wagons, a conscription camp, a midnight show, a Buick, and many other things equally indigenous." Delmore Schwartz, "The Poet's Progress," The Nation, 156, No. 2 (1943), p. 63.
8. Schwartz, p. 63.
9. "The Jewish Writer and the English Literary Tradition," Commentary, 8 (1949), p. 209.
10. "The Jewish Writer and the English Literary Tradition," p. 369.
11. "The Jewish Writer and the English Literary Tradition," p. 370.
12. "The Jewish Writer and the English Literary Tradition," p. 370.
13. Anti-Semitic material appears in some of the earlier poems of Eliot. The best-known example, "Burbank with a Baedeker: Bleistein with a Cigar," was published in his second book, Poems (1919). In the later prose, especially in the 1948 essay, "Notes Towards the Definition of Culture," Eliot again reveals his anti-Semitic bias. "It is against a background of Christianity that all our thought has significance. An individual European may not believe

that the Christian faith is true, and yet what he says, and makes and does, will all spring out of his heritage of Christian culture and depend upon that culture for its meaning," as cited in Robert Alter, "Eliot, Lawrence, and the Jews: Two Versions of Europe," in Defenses of the Imagination: Jewish Writers and Modern Historical Crisis (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1977/5738), p. 137. Pound's anti-Semitic and fascist radio broadcasts are even more infamous, as is his all too familiar portrait of the Jew as international banker/source of the world's evils, a standard anti-Semitic myth propagated throughout European civilization from the middle ages to the present. For information on Pound's anti-Semitism see Barry Goldensohn, "Pound and Antisemitism," The Yale Review, 75, No. 3 (1986), pp. 399-421.

14. Karl Shapiro, "The Scapegoat of Modern Poetry," in In Defense of Ignorance (New York: Random House, 1960), p. 84.
15. Shapiro, "The True Contemporary," In Defense of Ignorance, p. 150.
16. Shapiro, "The True Contemporary," p. 169.
17. Shapiro, "The True Contemporary," pp. 160-161.
18. Karl Malkoff, "The Self in the Modern World: Karl Shapiro's Jewish Poems," in Contemporary American-Jewish Literature: Critical Essays, ed. Irving Malin (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1973), pp. 214-215.
19. Malkoff suggests that in these lines "the total relationship between the two traditions [Christian and Jewish]" is "finally expressed in paradox." Malkoff, p. 215.
20. Judah Halevi, "My Heart is in the East," Hebrew Verse, ed. and trans. T. Carmi (New York: Penguin Books, 1982), p. 347.
21. According to the Midrash, God first created the Torah, "the letters of the Jews," and then consulted the Torah for instructions on the creation of the world. Midrash Rabbah (Soncino Press: London, 1977) vol. 1: Gen. 1:4-8.
22. "It was only in the last generation or two that an American Jew could write Jewishly and still be thought of as an American. Twenty years ago, when I was beginning to write for publication, I wrote an American poet whom I knew to be Jewish and asked him what obstacles one had to overcome to publish poems under a Jewish name. His reply was so ambiguous that I decided his own name wasn't very Jewish after all. I was not imagining things: many years

later a non-Jewish poet said to me: 'When I first saw your poems I thought you had an impossible name for a poet.' This remark did not indicate anti-Semitism or anything of this sort, but it suggests the persistence of the British tradition in American letters until a very late date. In this respect I feel I have done a little pioneer work for American writers: changing of names has always shocked me deeply, even though it has always been a common practice among writers. But in poetry, or any other art, the question of race or religion is of the highest significance. Karl Shapiro, "The Jewish Writer in America," in In Defense of Ignorance (New York: Random House, 1960), pp. 208-209. Ironically, Shapiro did change the spelling of his name, not to make it appear any less Jewish, rather to make it seem as if he were a German and not a Russian Jew: ". . . as a 'kid,' he changed the spelling of his name from Carl to Karl because 'we were always led to believe that German Jews were better than Russian Jews, so when I found out that Karl was the German spelling of my name I changed it.'" Shapiro as cited in Joseph Reino, Karl Shapiro (Boston: Twayne Publishers, a Division of G. K. Hall & Co., 1981), p. 22.

23. "[W]ithin himself," Sartre writes, "the Jew considers himself the same as others. He speaks the same language; he has the same class interests, the same national interests; he reads the newspapers that the others read, he votes as they do, he understands and shares their opinions." Jean-Paul Sartre, Anti-Semite and Jew (New York: Schocken Books, 1948), p. 78. "Within himself": the encounter with the prostitute is a rude reminder to the boy of his essential difference from other men. Sartre's thesis on Jewish identity--"it is not the Jewish character that provokes anti-Semitism but, rather . . . it is the anti-Semite who creates the Jew (S,143)"--was widely known and influential during the 1950s.

24. This encounter resembles the kind of encounter between Jew and non-Jew John Murray Cuddihy describes in The Ordeal of Civility: Freud, Marx, Levi-Strauss, and the Jewish Struggle with Modernity (Boston: Beacon Press, 1974). Latecomers to modernity, the Jews, Cuddihy argues, were faced with learning the proper, Protestant, manners for public life. Confined to the ghetto, the Jew drew no distinction between public and private life. The challenge presented to them at their Emancipation was to learn to be "nice," to wear the proper mask of civility. The young Jewish man in the prostitute's bedroom discovers that while clothing and refined speech habits may disguise him on the street, here he arrives at the very limits of assimilation, the point beyond which no Jew can go.

25. "The first thing the Germans did was to forbid Jews access to swimming pools; it seemed to them that if the body of an Israelite were to plunge into that confined body of water, the water would be completely befouled. Strictly speaking, the Jew contaminates even the air he breathes." Sartre, p. 34.
26. Malkoff, p. 222.
27. Leslie A. Fiedler, "On the Road; Or The Adventures of Karl Shapiro," Poetry, 96, No. 3 (1960), pp. 171-78.
28. Fiedler, p. 171.
29. Fiedler, p. 174.
30. Fiedler, p. 176.
31. Fielder, p. 177.
32. Paul Lauter, "The Jewish Hero: Two Views," The New Republic, 139, No. 21 (1958), pp. 18-19.
33. Lauter, p. 18.

### CHAPTER 3 DAVID IGNATOW: THE REFUSE MAN

Reading David Ignatow's poetry, we could easily overlook the fact of the poet's Jewishness, attending instead to the wry wit that salts aphoristic lyric and prose poetry depicting the violence of city life, or the tranquility of suburban nature. Alerted, however, to his Jewishness, we begin to detect the imprint of Jewish experience on the poems. The most prominent Jewish feature of his work, particularly his early work (poems written from the 1940s to the 1960s), is the urban consciousness of the second-generation American Jew. One might also suspect that the poems of this period reflect a belief in God.

But there is a deeper Jewish influence, identified by Ignatow in his prose, that underlies most of the poetry: the writings of the prophets and psalms. What he gleans from these Biblical sources does not directly influence his style. Except in a few early poems ("An Evening" or "We Came Naked", for instance) he does not imitate Biblical syntax; neither does he incorporate Biblical diction or symbology in his poems. As for faith in God, certainly a central feature in the writings of the prophets and the

psalms, even during the years in which Ignatow professed such a faith it plays a much less central role in the poetry than one might expect from a man profoundly influenced by the Bible.

Nevertheless, the influence exists and is best understood as a moral influence, providing Ignatow with a driving sense of moral obligation to his community of readers. Though he admittedly is humbled by his recognition of the power of the psalms, Ignatow aspires to become, like the psalmists, a true man of history. "How through the centuries they have kept a people together and made a history," Ignatow writes of the psalmists, "they are the true men of history, the activists, these poets."<sup>1</sup> It is in modelling his work and its relation to the world on the psalmists and the prophets that Ignatow most deeply demonstrates the influence of Jewish experience.

Indeed, to Ignatow the psalms represent not part of the fundamental heritage of Western civilization but specifically part of his fundamental heritage as a Jew.

With his recitation of the Psalms of David, the rabbi made the moment (the burial of my mother) inspiring. It was then I could get an insight into the Jewish religion. It is essentially a poetic one and it is only its poetry that sustains and nourishes it from century to century. What a tradition I belong to!

(N,145)

Still despite the influence of this quintessentially Jewish text, the Psalms of David, on his work, it cannot finally be

considered centrally Jewish in its concerns. For whether he is writing as a believer or a skeptic, Ignatow is not interested in documenting the Jewish condition. Rather he dedicates his work to the articulation of "the character of life itself for all of us," the understanding of which he approaches through the gate of Jewish experience, a gate in part defined by the writings of the psalms and prophets (N, 276).

A handful of Ignatow's poems, in particular a short series published in the 1961 book, Say Pardon, exhibit characteristics of the conventional psalm.

The psalm is typically cast in the form of direct address, but because the vocative is invariably from man to God, the one addressed is really not an object of rhetorical manipulation. The speaker may try to remind God of His promises to Israel, of human transience, of the speaker's desperate plight, and by so doing to plead for divine mercy, but the more prominent processes of change effected by speech are in the speaker himself, who through the act of poetry probes his own nature or comes to see more clearly the world around him or the pattern of history or the moral character of man.<sup>2</sup>

In the most conventionally psalm-like poems of Ignatow the speaker stands squarely before his God, assessing his life. "I felt I had met the Lord," begins "I Felt."<sup>3</sup> "He calmed me, calling me/to look into my child's room./He said, I am love,/and you will win your life/out of my hands/by taking up your child." In "Without Fear," after asking himself whether or not self-pity, terror and love are "enough to

preserve us," Ignatow concludes, "Without fear of contradiction,/I give you God in my life" (P,142). In the most moving poem of the series, "The Rightful One," a narrative, the speaker responds to his ill son's announcement that "he [God] is here, dad" (P,145).

He had come. I saw Him standing,  
 his hair long, face exhausted, eyes sad  
 and knowing, and I bent my knee,  
 terrified at the reality,  
 but he restrained me with a hand  
 and said, I am a sufferer like yourself.  
 I have come to let you know.  
 And I arose, my heart swelling, and said,  
 I have failed and bitterness is in me.  
 And he replied, And forgiveness too.  
 Bless your son. And I blessed him  
 and his face brightened. And the Rightful One  
 was gone and left a power to feel free.

Each of the poems records a process of self-evaluation conducted in the presence of God, an experience which results in a renewal of the speaker's strength as well as an implicit affirmation of the centrality of God to his well-being.

But even after he abandons his belief in God--"I used to talk about God but that has no basis in fact," he notes in 1962 (N,241)--Ignatow continues to write poems that reflect the influence of the psalms. In "The Image," the concluding poem of Ignatow's most recent book, a man stands before a mirror, contemplating his reflected image.

Though it does not need him,  
 he is its servant as he stands there,  
 doing what is necessary

to keep it in the mirror--humbled  
and grateful for its presence,  
that which reveals him to himself.  
If there is a god, this is he.<sup>4</sup>

This poem records the same process of self-probing that we saw in the earlier poems; this process results in deeper understanding of his moral character, the moral character of man, similar to the earlier poems. Where this poem swerves is in the object of worship: where God once stood, now stands man. But even with its swerve, this poem remains fairly close to the traditional psalm.

Of the poems which derive from the psalms, most represent much more radical departures from the Biblical text than the fairly traditional psalm-like poems we have been considering. In several poems, for instance, which record a conflict of manners, only the ghost of the psalms lingers. These poems retain the sense of self-probing with the goal of increased understanding of the world or history or the moral character of man. But the judge before whom the speaker stands is neither God nor universal man. Instead, the speaker, an uncivilized man, confronts himself before the civilized community with whom he daily interacts. Thus, while the nature of the experience has changed from essentially religious to sociological, secular, the structure of the experience has remained fundamentally the same.

The encounter between civilized and uncivilized man, an ordeal of civility, was the typical experience of first- and second-generation immigrant Jews, latecomers to modernity, attempting to assimilate to Gentile culture.<sup>5</sup> "Because of 'the tribal, rather than the civil, nature of Jewish culture,'" writes sociologist John Murray Cuddihy, "Jewish Emancipation involved Jews in collisions with the differentiations of Western society."<sup>6</sup> He continues, "The differentiations most foreign to the shtetl subculture of Yiddishkeit were those of public from private behavior and of manners from morals. . . . The problem of behavior . . . became strategic to the whole problematic of 'assimilation'" (0,12-13). In other words, Jews needed to learn the Gentile code of public behavior.

This need was particularly profound in the cities, where strangers interacted with one another routinely.

The emergence of cities, multiplying strangers, expelling us from our "tribal brotherhoods" into the "universal otherhood" of an urban "world of strangers," enables us to live with unknown others without transforming them into either brothers or enemies. Initiation into the social interaction rituals of civility equips us "to deal with strangers routinely" in urban public space [Cuddihy's emphasis]. (0,12)

Cuddihy uses one word to characterize the central tenet of the culture of civility: "niceness." "'Niceness' is as good a name as any for the informally yet pervasively institutionalized civility expected--indeed required--of

members (and of aspirant members) of that societal community called the civic culture" (0,13).

For the Jews the entrance into civilized public culture was particularly problematic. "[H]ow widespread," Cuddihy, citing Norman Podhoretz, reminds us, "up into our own time, 'and not least among Jews, was the association of Jewishness with vulgarity and lack of cultivation'" (0,39). We can recall the many doors closed to the Jew in this country due to the perpetuation of this belief. "Gentiles rejected the notion of sharing with Jews the social prestige conferred by such places and organizations [social clubs, resorts, hotels, college fraternities]. The Jews were deemed socially unacceptable intruders who brought only money to the elevated circles to which they sought entrance."<sup>7</sup> Irving Howe sums it up best when he describes the behavioral characteristics and cultural milieu of the shtetl. "Having love they [the Jews] had no need for politeness" (0,14).

That Ignatow, a self-conscious second-generation American Jew himself, reflects the ordeal of civility in his poetry is no surprise. He is haunted by his family heritage; he is unable to cleanse himself of the distinguishing characteristics of the son of an immigrant Jew.

Because of [my] immigrant past, because my parents were not born here, because I am come new to the scene I will undoubtedly exaggerate what is taken for granted by the third generation American and tend to ignore the subtleties that to him make

America. I will run for the most prominent things first. I will be like a child at a soda fountain for the first time and I will order ice cream with cherries upon cherries and syrup dripping to the floor, while seated in small corners with their cokes and straws others born to this life will know how to take it all in small doses. Because of this difference and only because I have stuck to my parents too closely I am a stranger too in this country. (N,63)

His fear of behaving in an unrefined, indulgent manner recorded in 1953 hardens into the resentment expressed in 1956.

I resent the poise and breeding of those later generations. . . . I resent their advantage over me. I resent my shortcomings and my sense of inadequacy before them. . . . I resent the implication left to me of not belonging because I feel such implication is justified.

I am after all of my parents' influence and they have brought with them the conditioning of the old country that has rubbed off on me--as to the way I think my thoughts, such as these which I have gotten from my stuttering father who found it hard to make his living here. . . . I resent my ability to do likewise because I have gotten from my father that vague smile of dismissal of values, with nothing to replace it but a deference, as I saw him practice before those who would speak English fluently, and I have interpreted his deference and humility as a way of life, with some secret reason for its being, whose reason still escapes me. (N,133)

Rather than mastering the art of civility necessary for admission to Gentile culture, he masters the art of humility, he practices the posture of the unassimilable Jew.

In his prose Ignatow readily identifies his immigrant Jewish parents, whose behavior stigmatizes them and him,

preventing their entry into Gentile culture, as the source of his sociological conflict. In his poetry on the same subject, the conflict of civility, Ignatow fails to trace the conflict back to its roots. "A Case History," for example, is written as a dialogue between the speaker and his "asshole." "Lately my asshole has been talking to me/about the world. . . . I had thought of seeing a doctor/but my anus said, To hell with the doctor,/listen to me. I am here at the center of things" (P,182). In choosing between a doctor and the asshole, the speaker chooses between the sophisticated and the primitive, the cultured and the crude, the Gentile and the Jew.

Actually the speaker has little choice, for with its "rumbling and farting," its "crap" and "shit," the asshole commands his attention. And having listened to its complaint about the "garbage" that he takes into his system which the asshole must subsequently expel, the speaker reflects, "My mind is not what it should be, happy and hopeful/and filled with joy at the sight of the world,/so blue and bright on a fine morning,/and even rain I used to love but love less now,/worried about catching cold or losing the crease/in my trousers." In this formula, the obstacle to happiness is a preoccupation with the trivial matter of appearance, the crease in the trousers. His obsession with the crease indicates his obsession with the values of civility. Should he give up his interest in the

crease, the doctor, the Gentile culture and side with his talking asshole, with behavior that is anything but nice, he may indeed come close again to happiness.

The poem concludes: "My poor asshole,/so unhappy and rebellious,/we will comfort one another until the end." The consciousness of manners loses out to the consciousness of matter; the Jew will remain a Jew, however uncivilized. This conflict of manners and matter (which in other poems is expressed more directly as a conflict of manners and morals) is also the subject of "Versicle and Response," an epigrammatic poem written during the same period, the 1960s, as "A Case History": "Look smooth/talk nice/stay happy--/Kiss my ass" (P,256).

The prose-poem "The Diner" (Facing the Tree, 1975) opens with a question, "If I order a sandwich and get a plate of ham and eggs instead, has communication broken down?" (NCP,14) Pondering this dilemma, the speaker tries to convince himself, "I have to be nice about it too and say thank you to the silence. But I want to know why I can't have what I want that's such an innocent wish as between a sandwich and a plate of ham and eggs?" The diner's wish may indeed be innocent, but the frustration triggers a Kafkaesque, existential nightmare. "What have I said or did I say what I thought I did or am I in my own country where my language is spoken? Where am I? Why can't I leave this diner? This is not my country." Confronting the world of

civility--"I have to be nice"--the diner awakens to his alienation from that culture; he learns that his language is not their language, that their prescribed manners deny him the freedom to speak up and be heard. His nightmare concludes when he discovers that he "quite possibl[y]" made these "ham and eggs myself instead of a sandwich" and that indeed he may be the "owner [of the diner] because no one else is here and I have the key to open the door, exactly like my car key." Here is the double bind: he is at once patron and owner, an alienated man and the creator of his alienation, a man acting according to public expectation (civility) and private desire, Gentile and Jew.

In the first psalm-like poems we discussed, the distinction between self and other was precise: God and man. In "The Image" the distinction begins to break down: self and other are reflected images of one another. In "The Diner" there is no other separate from the self: the self contains the other. This is the predicament of an individual living neither wholly as a Jew nor wholly as a Gentile. This is the predicament of an individual who has learned the rules of civility but remains reluctant to play according to those rules. "It is my duty to speak of myself and my mixed heritage," Ignatow wrote in 1964, "to speak of myself purely . . . as an American, a Jew and a world contemporary, a skeptic and a desperate believer in the One" (N,276).

In one of his many dream poems, "In My Dream" (Tread the Dark, 1978) Ignatow describes a child who teases an adult, an artist, who is excessively "stolid, stoic, enduring" and whose life resembles a work of art. The child even plays with the man's "most valued art."

the statue of respectability, that of congeniality, that of cooperativeness, of the concerned citizen and many, many others that I wander among in admiration of my sculptural talent (N,121)

The values of which the child is playfully critical--respectability, congeniality, cooperativeness, civic responsibility--are not merely the cliched signs of maturity. Rather they are the signs of civility, the masks of gentility, which, prior to his dream encounter with the child, the speaker wore with pride.

The child, finally, teaches the adult to regard his sculptures as well as his "sculptured" life of civility with a greater sense of humor, a greater sense of detachment, "just that touch of humor by which I will be separated from the thing itself, and the child and I will enjoy ourselves together, and the old silence within me that made me uncomfortable and drove me to forget myself in work will have vanished in laughter between us." This rediscovered attitude of detachment suggests an aesthetic as well as a cultural development. His work, his art, had been created according to aesthetic standards which valued "the thing

itself," the object of creation, more than the life of the creator. His decision to value his life--spontaneous, unrefined, at times even crude--at least equal to his art, his decision not to mask himself, to forget himself, in his work, represents a retreat from the values of civility to the values of the tribal Jew.

Ignatow's challenge to the period's aesthetics is a natural outgrowth of the cultural conflict he experiences as a second-generation American Jew. "Wanting always to be taken as one of you, I practice harder and more cleverly than otherwise the sociable arts, against my instinct to rebel and shout out my sacrifice and anger," Ignatow writes in a 1962 Notebook entry (N,245). By "sociable arts" Ignatow means not only dinner etiquette but also the etiquette of poetry. But more often than not, despite his claim to the contrary, his instinct to rebel wins out and he exposes to the public some of his very unsociable arts. "I am the chair he sits on at the desk to type his poems and letters and comments on himself and others, a strange man. He can actually fart while typing the most soulful lines" ("The Reply," Whisper to the Earth, 1981; NCP,227).

In a bitter satire from Tread the Dark, "85," Ignatow directly challenges the "literary establishment" for rewarding poets who practice the sociable art of "perfect form" (by which presumably he means metered verse) while

ignoring what he regards as the real social issues of the day.

Hello, drug addict, can you become a poem of perfect form?  
Hello, Mafia, can you become a poem of perfect form?  
Hello, schizoid person, can you become a poem of perfect form?  
Hello, raped girl, can you become a poem of perfect form?  
Hello, dead, napalmed man, can you become a poem of perfect form?  
Hello, incinerated Jew, can you become a poem of perfect form?  
If you can't, then you don't deserve to live..

• • •

. . . you're a foreigner and we don't want you.  
You're a kook and we hate you. You're a shit  
and we wipe you off the face of the earth.  
If you can't make yourself a poem of perfect form  
then you have no right to be in this country.

• • •

Fuck me, poem of perfect form.  
Let me fuck you. We'll fuck each other.  
We have each other, right, so let's do all the nasty  
things we dream about and we'll have fun and nobody else  
will know about it but you and me and me and me  
and me and you.

(N,144-145)

The aesthetic debate is not a Jewish issue. But the side Ignatow takes in this debate is perfectly consonant with his position as a Jew. He lacks the social grace to blend in with the host culture. He questions the moral foundations of that culture which seems to value social grace or manners or form over matter or content.

While many of the other poems we have discussed thus far do not resemble the psalms stylistically--most lack parallel phrases; few celebrate God directly by praising his creations, even though Ignatow writes in 1951, "Man's work is for nothing but to point to the greater glory of God" (N,38-9)--they do retain that essential element of self-probing before a formidable figure--, God, man or Gentile culture. The last poem discussed has ranged far from the psalms. "85" casts its gaze outward rather than inward, directing its critical appraisal not to the self but to the world. In that it resembles the writings of the prophets more than the psalms.

Robert Alter characterizes prophetic poetry, in contrast to the psalms, as "a form of direct address to a historically real audience . . ." (A,140).

What are the principal modes of prophetic poetry? The overarching purpose is reproof (and not, I would contend, prediction), and this general aim is realized through three related poetic strategies: (1) direct accusation; (2) satire; (3) the monitorial evocation of impending disaster. (A,141)

Ignatow practices all three of the principle modes Alter identifies. In and of itself this is insufficient evidence upon which to conclude that a second feature of Ignatow's writing is the prophetic feature. But Ignatow makes it clear in his prose that not only is he as inspired by the prophets as he is by the psalms but that he shares a common

goal with the prophets, namely saving the world from destruction: "To write so that I can change the world for the better through my own example," Ignatow states in 1970 (N, 328).

To these ends Ignatow dedicates the content of his poetry. In 1965 he even recognizes what he considers the solipsistic tendency in the practice of free verse and speaks out against that dangerous trend.

All poetry is referential. It depends then to what the poet is referring. If he is referring to his limited condition, making a virtue of his isolation from society, then he raises exile to a value in itself. However, freedom as the individual experiences it is to go freely from group to group, from man to man, woman to woman, in friendship, whether or not we can fathom or comprehend each man's or woman's individuality. That is the first basis of a free society. But if this is denied and each group looks with suspicion on the next, then the free society does not exist, and to make it seem as if all the freedom is within the group is sectarian, short-lived. Free form, which has to do with free association of ideas and emotions, within such circumstances is quickly exhausted and becomes a menace to free sensibilities without which no poet can exist as a poet.

The question now is where we are in this society. I say the free form is losing its force, its widest referential basis, the nation, the world, because there no longer is such a basis for free form. The world is terribly divided, in a way that could not possibly lead to a promising future for all. If we insist upon free form, it must be so with an imagined goal in mind, as with Jeremiah, Isaiah. To insist that each within his group or nation has the freedom, and no one else, is to close out freedom within yourself, is an automatic limitation upon your sensibilities as a poet. Your free form will soon exhaust itself within the circle you have drawn around it.

Against all odds we must fight for the world and  
not for the group.

(N, 308)

In characterizing free form as that "which has to do with free association of ideas and emotions," Ignatow overlooks a fundamental structural aspect of free verse: the line lengths of any individual poem may vary according to the poet's aesthetic sensibility or, in bad cases, his whim. If the poet were to pay too much attention to lineation, he might lose sight of what Ignatow considers the purpose of free form poetry: to foster the cause of freedom for all humanity. The practitioners of this style of poetry who best exemplify the moral integrity of free form, Ignatow suggests, are the prophets.

Ostensibly addressed to other free form poets, Ignatow's comments on free form and the prophets, of course, reflect his concerns about his own writing, modelled on the prophets. The historical audience whom the prophets addressed was the Jews. But beyond imploring the Jews to create a just, righteous society, the prophets hoped to hasten the coming of the messianic age in which justice and righteousness would be practiced by all of humanity. The historical audiences whom Ignatow addresses range from the citizens of America to the citizens of the world. But the platform from which he speaks is the platform of the Jews.

Ignatow's prophetic writing in the satiric mode is aimed at many targets, including those closest to his

immediate experience as a second-generation American Jew. In "Harold" (Poems, 1948), he engages the topic of anti-Semitism, satirizing for an audience of American anti-Semites the behavior of a Baptist cowboy come east to work as an admissions clerk in a Jewish hospital.

### Harold

From the west comes Harold, with a bitter smile,  
and a dry hate in his voice for micks, wops,  
kikes and refugees.

Too bad he has to work  
in a Jewish hospital, admitting Jewish people,  
sick or ready to give birth. He makes sure  
not to raise his head while women suffer  
before him as he writes slowly his data.  
Or else how could he write home to the West,  
to the tall sombreros and the spittin' type  
that he, the climax of a pioneering dream,  
works for the Jews to make his bread?  
Where is the gun he ought to pull  
to plug them all, then swing off at a canter  
for parts unknown till things cool off,  
still master of his fate and fortune,  
his own?  
Here he mouths blasphemous phrases,  
shocking his own Baptist soul. He makes free  
with farts, shoots his jibes,  
orders the help around.  
He laces it into the assistant director,  
the biggest, bloatiest doctor of them all,  
and takes his something bucks a week disdainfully  
for rent, food, gas to keep a car  
and six-cent stamp for home. (P,48-49)

This unflattering portrait of the anti-Semitic, racist  
"climax of a pioneering dream," the American dream,  
registers along the way, as it were, the ascension of the  
Jew to power, a recovery from the Jewish helplessness, the  
powerlessness of which Ignatow has bitterly complained  
elsewhere. But this poem does not reflect a chauvinistic

treatment of the Jews. The Jews are hardly present in the poem at all, enough only for Harold to exercise the full range of his disdain for them. Ignatow is not interested in promoting the Jews at the expense of other groups in America. He is interested, however, in exposing any corruptions which undermine the moral integrity of the nation.

The Jews themselves are not exempt from the corrupting influences of a capitalistic nation. In "Europe and America," a poem of family conflict from the first book, Poems (1948), Ignatow implicates European culture for its emotional indulgences and American culture for its materialistic indulgences. These cultural influences are ultimately responsible for undermining the unity of the family, Ignatow's family.

My father brought the emigrant bundle  
of desperation and worn threads,  
that in anxiety as he stumbles  
tumble out distractedly;  
while I am bedded upon soft green money  
that grows like grass.  
Thus, between my father  
who lives on a bed of anguish for his daily bread,  
and I who tear money at leisure by the roots,  
where I lie in sun or shade,  
a vast continent of breezes, storms to him,  
shadows, darkness to him, small lakes, rough  
channels  
to him, and hills, mountains to him, lie between  
us.

My father comes of a small hell  
where bread and man have been kneaded and baked  
together.  
You have heard the scream as the knife fell;

while I have slept  
as guns pounded offshore. (P, 49)

Ignatow makes the rhetorical gesture of personalizing the poem by suddenly addressing his father directly in the final stanza, in effect attempting to narrow the distance between father and son. But both father and son remain hopelessly and equally trapped by their cultural experiences--poverty and wealth, vulnerability and security--which inhibit the chances of their ever fully understanding one another. By satirizing both the father's impossible anxieties and the speaker's lazy decadence, Ignatow distances himself from the experience enough to locate the family conflict within a historical and cultural context.

Even "Get the Gasworks," also from Poems, can be read as a satirical portrait of urban American life spinning recklessly out of control.

#### Get the Gasworks

Get the gasworks in a poem  
and you've got the smoke and smokestacks,  
the mottled red and yellow tenements,  
and grimy kids who curse with the pungency  
of the odor of gas. You've got America, boy.

Sketch in the river, and barges,  
all dirty and slimy.  
How do the seagulls stay so white?  
And always cawing like little mad geniuses?  
You've got the kind of living  
that makes the kind of thinking we do:  
gaswork smokestack whistle tooting wisecracks.

They don't come because we like it that way,  
but because we find it outside our window every  
morning,

in soot on the furniture,  
and trucks carrying coal for gas,  
the kid hot after the ball under the wheel.  
He gets it over the belly alright.  
He lies there.

So the kids keep tossing the ball around  
after the funeral.  
So the cops keep chasing them,  
so the mamas keep hollering,  
and papa flings his newspaper outward,  
in disgust with discipline. (P,52)

In a 1978 interview Ignatow said of "Get the Gasworks," "It's obviously a statement of objectivist poetry."<sup>8</sup> It is also an example of Ignatow writing confidently in the American idiom, inspired by his mentor William Carlos Williams. Ignatow's concern that he will never be fully American--"When I think I am wholly American, I remember my parents and become pained. They, I feel, are withholding from me the full expression of a heritage, mine and yet not mine entirely" (N,63)--would be unfounded if all of his poems were written in this style. In "Get the Gasworks" he captures an unmistakably American rhythm, a clearly recognizable American colloquial tone.

Yet for all its success in capturing a lively American spirit, this poem is also an indictment of American life. Like "Europe and America," "Get the Gasworks" refrains from offering any openly judgmental statements. Ignatow does not pause to comment on the action after the child has been run over. Imitating perhaps the speed and callousness of American city life, Ignatow merely jumps ahead to the next

important fact: "So the kids keep tossing the ball around after the funeral." The unmanageable kids keep tossing the ball around and no one can stop them, not the cops, not their mothers, not their fathers, flinging their newspapers outward. This is American life out of control and Ignatow does not condone it, but like the prophet records it with the hope that someone will recognize himself or herself in this picture and perhaps adjust his or her behavior.

"Harold," "Europe and America," and "Get the Gasworks" are, finally, only marginally within the prophetic tradition. The prophetic motivation clearly underlies the poems, but the prophetic condemnation is proffered only indirectly. In "Bowery" both the prophetic motivation and the prophetic condemnation approximate what can be found in the writings of the Biblical prophets. "Bowery" addresses a subject traditionally associated with the writings of the prophets, the treatment of homeless, drunken bums. The poem's condemnation of capitalists, though still indirect, is painfully clear.

Bums are the spirit of us parked in ratty old hotels.

Bums are what we have made of angels,  
given them old clothes to wear  
dirty beards and an alcoholic breath,  
to lie sprawled on gutters at our feet  
as sacrifices to our idols: power and money.

(P,51)

The poem begins from the sentimental point-of-view of the bourgeois, who regard these bums not as equals, entitled

to the same human rights as they, but as expendable members of society, sacrifices to the idols of power and money. The remainder of the poem is written from the point-of-view of the bums themselves.

Bums ask themselves, Why dress and shave, and be well mannered, studious and hard-working, own home and debts, a bank account and business friends when others more eager are doing it successfully? All we want is the right to sit propped up against a wall, drunk and drooling, letting urine seep through our clothes onto the sidewalk, we unconscious or unconcerned.

We with no money relax anyway, letting the world come in on us in sidewalk spit on which we sprawl, in kicks and jabs from cops, under open skies in rain and snow. None of you dares do it, and so you do not know what money means. We who live on charity enjoy the pleasure of your wealth, the long hours filled with drunkenness.

Speaking with a kind of perverse dignity, the bums inform the bourgeois, as only they can, of the true meaning of money: money hardens one man against another. Even the practice of charity in a capitalist society is false, demoralizing, for the money thrown at the poor to assuage the guilt of the rich does nothing for the poor but afford them the "pleasure" of "long hours filled with drunkenness" and cannot finally absolve the rich of their sins.

For all its Marxist overtones, "Bowery" remains squarely within the prophetic tradition. Sympathizing with the outcast, the helpless members of society who let the world come in on them in sidewalk spit, Ignatow places

himself among the prophets trying to arouse the moral consciousness of a sleeping nation.

Ignatow's prophetic consciousness extends from local and national affairs to global events as indicated, for instance, by a prose poem from his 1984 book, Leaving the Door Open, on the subject of Idi Amin.

This newspaper states that Idi Amin killed over one hundred thousand Ugandans last year. How did we manage to do that, Idi? I am an ordinary man, I enjoy my food; I love to make love. How did I manage to kill that many? (NCP, 240)

Ignatow is no longer a boy who sleeps comfortably while guns pound off-shore. Here he is an ordinary man--"An ordinary man is a message to the world," he wrote in 1948 (P, 44)--presumably a New Yorker still, who miraculously shares his identity with Idi Amin and assumes responsibility for over one hundred thousand murders committed on a distant continent. The identification with Amin is so strong that like the Ugandan leader, the speaker will murder anyone who challenges his power, "not openly but by practicing rites forbidden them. They raise gods and magical powers above my rule."

In the second part of the prose poem the speaker "broods on death."

Here in the palace, Idi, I ask myself why do I think this way, and I answer myself reassuringly: power is beauty and beauty is what I am after, that which I feel in my marrow when I exert power.

Then I transcend myself, I become the power, and I kill to make my beauty blaze.

The poem concludes with a preposterous affirmation of the dictator's, the speaker's, omnipotence: "I forgive myself, there is no one to take my place, for I am; therefore, I must be Idi Amin." Ignatow's willingness to identify so completely with Amin and to claim imaginative responsibility for the crimes against humankind committed by Amin in part reflect his deep absorption of the prophetic tradition.

Of course, it is possible to indulge oneself in the belief that speaking out in a poem is a sufficient response to acts of immorality. Undoubtedly, relatively few have read this poem and even fewer would be willing to share the sense of moral obligation to the world that Ignatow tries to express here. Thus, the poem may be simply the vehicle the poet employs to purge himself of the rage he suffers reading the news. Practically or politically speaking, the poem's contribution to the prevention of future crimes such as those committed by Amin is slight indeed.

This prose poem, finally, may be simply another of Ignatow's literary experiments.

I would begin with something very improbable, an improbable statement, and seek to make it plausible for myself by using materials that would generally apply to direct observation. I would use incidents and develop that improbable statement, using such incidents in relation to it, as Kafka does--incidents you would generally

associate with everyday existence. In other words, I'd lull you into believing that this improbable event could actually happen.

(OBU,80-81)

Though as an individual poem it seems formulaic, unimaginative, it remains consistent with Ignatow's prophetic goal, in this case broadcasting the news of one disaster, all the while warning of the possibility of future similar disasters.

Humility is a characteristic common to the Biblical prophets. In the Idi Amin poem humility is overshadowed by the outrageousness of the poet's claims. In the 1981 prose poem "Company" (Whisper to the Earth), Ignatow successfully retains the posture of humility, explicitly identifying himself as a prophet who is nothing but a man among men, a "human being in trouble."

### Company

I am a cripple, my two arms hanging down over my head from the elbows. I have to walk that way, as if they were partially raised in despair with things as they are. But to have to walk through the streets with my arms raised above my head brings me the stares of strangers passing by. What could they think except that I am one of the many mad that walk freely through the streets, or a prophetic figure, which sets them to tremble inwardly, just after having received their latest bribe or their most recent prostitute. I suppose I could be some sort of message that allows me to walk through the streets with a show of confidence.

(NCP,178)

Many of Ignatow's themes resonate in this prose poem. Here is the self-conscious outsider on public display, regarded as either a mad man or prophet. Here is the modest man who believes that his life is his message. Here too is the witness--witness to his own suffering as well as the suffering of others, witness to the suffering people inflict upon one another--who does "not pass judgment on you and, if you should find it in yourself to see me as but a human being in trouble, think of me as company too." When others look at this disfigured prophet and suffer the guilt of their own misbehaviors the prophet has accomplished half of his task. When others look at him and see a "human being in trouble" and think of him as company too, he has accomplished the other half: he has awakened compassion in his fellow humans.

This perhaps has been Ignatow's goal, the goal of the true prophet, all along: to awaken compassion. "The Refuse Man" (Facing the Tree, 1975), one of Ignatow's best poems in the last three decades, works with the same theme, only this time presenting evidence of the human failure to act with compassion. The central character in the poem, the refuse man is emblematic of poet as prophet dragging his turn-of-the-century wagon of refuse throughout the countryside.

#### The Refuse Man

I'm going to pull my stinking wagon  
through the streets and countryside,  
letting it smell up the highways

and its odor crawl into the one-  
 and two-family houses along the road  
 and over the corn and wheat fields  
 and let the cows raise their heads  
 from munching to bellow their anger  
 and the cop to draw up alongside  
 my wagon--I'll be pulling it  
 between the shafts--and let this cop,  
 holding his nose, come over to ask  
 in an awed voice what the hell  
 it is I'm hauling and I'll tell him,  
 as sweetly as I can, "A dish of rotted guts,  
 an empty skull, a fetid breast, a swarming  
 belly, a corpse, a man right out  
 of his mother's belly given his occupation,  
 and I've put myself between the shafts--  
 a horse will not come near this;  
 I had to, being a man." (NCP,30)

What characterizes the man represented in many of Ignatow's poems is the willingness to witness, like a prophet, the evils of this century, to record what he sees in lyric poems, to haul the human refuse of a century in a wagon no animal would near, to lug this fetid load from town to town with no intention of unburdening himself. The reaction of the suspicious cop to the refuse man, questioning him in an "awed voice," is precisely the reaction Ignatow wishes to inspire. Awe. A profound fear, a profound terror, an honest response to the horrors that have plagued the twentieth century.

The Jews have no exclusive claim on morality in literature. To suggest that the moral stance which unifies Ignatow's poetry is the dominant Jewish characteristic of the work would be preposterous. But Ignatow clearly arrives at his sense of morality through a profound encounter with

Jewish culture, in particular the writings of the prophets and psalms which to him represent quintessentially Jewish texts.

That he dismisses Judaism as being too exclusive, too narrow in its concerns, that he does not choose to address exclusively Jewish issues, to enter the melee of evolving Jewish communal life in the modern world is no reason for us to dismiss the central role Jewish experience plays in shaping Ignatow's poetic vision, universalist as it is. In that Ignatow's poetry has chosen, for the most part, not to wear the characteristic clothing of the Jew, as it were,--no Jewish rituals are depicted in the poetry, few allusions to the rich heritage of Jewish rabbinical writing can be found--it may, finally, play only a minor role if any at all in the development of a distinctly American-Jewish voice in poetry. Few poets entering the growing conversation of American-Jewish poetry will converse with Ignatow's poetry. Nonetheless, Ignatow's example as an American-Jewish poet is indicative of the experience of most American-Jewish poets of his generation and the generation or two that have followed his: Jewish experience informs the poetry though Jewish experience per se is not consciously engaged in it.

Notes

1. David Ignatow, The Notebooks of David Ignatow, ed. Ralph J. Mills, Jr. (Chicago: The Swallow Press, Inc., 1973), p. 145.
2. Robert Alter, The Art of Biblical Poetry (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1985), p. 140.
3. David Ignatow, Poems: 1934 - 1969 (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1970), p. 141.
4. David Ignatow, New and Collected Poems, 1970-1985 (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1986), p. 332.
5. John Murray Cuddihy, The Ordeal of Civility: Freud, Marx, Levi-Strauss, and the Jewish Struggle with Modernity (Boston: Beacon Press, 1974), pp. 3-14.
6. Anonymous, "An Analysis of Jewish Culture," in Jews in a Gentile World: The Problem of Anti-Semitism, ed. Isacque Graeber and S.H. Britt (New York: Macmillan, 1942), p. 253, as cited in Cuddihy, p. 12.
7. David A. Gerber, Anti-Semitism in American History (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987), p. 23.
8. David Ignatow, Open Between Us, ed. Ralph J. Mills (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1980), p. 99.

## CHAPTER 4 PHILIP LEVINE'S TURNING

Philip Levine's poetry is famous for its portraits of working-class and political heroes, victimized survivors of a brutal world, rendered in short-lined free verse. The characteristic rhythmic intensity of his poems comes from long sentences of parallel phrases, composed of a blend of colloquial and Biblical diction, that build toward dramatic climaxes. This style in part reflects the universalization of Levine's experience as an American-Jewish working-class male from Detroit.

Levine is no stranger to work, as he insistently reminds us in the biographical note to many of his books: "After a succession of stupid jobs he [Levine] left the city for good. . . ."<sup>1</sup> This terse biographical note implicitly warns readers against regarding Levine's poems about workers as a liberal's sentimental portrait of the proletariat. For a significant portion of his youth, at least, Levine suffered the same life as the workers about whom he regularly writes. The black man "who danced all night at Chevy Gear & Axle" of "Silent in America" (Not This Pig, 1968); the angel Bernard, a factory worker, of "The Angels

of Detroit" (They Feed They Lion, 1972); Eddie of "Making Soda Pop" (One for the Rose, 1981); Stash, the punch press operator of "Sweet Will" (Sweet Will, 1985)--these and other unsung workers are the realistic heroes of Levine's poems.

Even when not portraying men at work, Levine is conscious of man laboring without relief. "[E]ach man has one brother . . . and . . . together they are only one man sharing a heart that always labors," Levine writes in "You Can Have It" (7YFS, 64).

In section VII of the powerful early poem "Silent in America," Levine dedicates his work, his poetry, to the workers and other victims he met at one or another of his "stupid jobs."

For a black man whose  
name I have forgotten who danced  
all night at Chevy  
Gear & Axle,  
for that great stunned Pole  
who laughed when he called me Jew  
Boy, for the ugly  
who had no chance<sup>2</sup>

His sympathy for the "underdog" originates, in part, in his experiences as a Jew growing up in Detroit.

We were a people scattered all over the world who knew what it was to be scattered all over the world. We knew what it was to be underdogs and to survive in the face of enmity and disrespect of others. We knew we were a noble people no matter what anyone told us to the contrary. Our great cultural heritage was that we could feel the suffering of any people and know that any people was as good as any other.<sup>3</sup>

Levine's particular experience of Jewish suffering enables him to act compassionately toward anyone who suffers; it also helped him discover in the Jew a universal symbol of suffering, of exile. Consequently, Levine's portraits of the Jew as well as other underdogs share realistic as well as mythological characteristics.

"Baby Villon," for instance, depicts an encounter between the poet and an imaginary other, an outcast, marginal figure who survives the cruelty of the world by fighting back.

He tells me in Bangkok he's robbed  
Because he's white; in London because he's black;  
In Barcelona, Jew; in Paris, Arab;  
Everywhere and at all times, and he fights back.  
(NTP, 80)

This protean creature is never transformed into a member of the dominant race; he's the international suspect, the mythological alien who refuses to give in, who in fact is strengthened by his pain. Though he could be angry at the world that despises him, there is "no anger/In the flat brown eyes flecked with blood"; though he could be enraged by his lowly status, "he's rated seventh in the world,/And there's no passion in his voice."

There is a marked resemblance between the poet and his imaginary brother.

And he points down at his black head ridged  
With black kinks of hair. He touches my hair,

Tells me I should never disparage  
The stiff bristles that guard the head of the  
fighter.

There are also characteristics that distinguish the two men from one another: the poet is graced with an untroubled fair and smooth face; Baby Villon, hardened by his travails, is "stiff, 116 pounds, five feet two, no bigger than a girl." The encounter concludes as Baby Villon "holds my shoulders,/Kisses my lips, his eyes still open,/My imaginary brother, my cousin,/Myself made otherwise by all his pain."

The hero of this excellent poem, Baby Villon, is presented in terms which assure that we will sympathize with his predicament. He is unjustly victimized, yet he remains levelheaded while defending his dignity. He is a fighter, but not a ruthless fighter, he is sensitive, loving and kind. He is a family man, saddened by the loss of his father, his brother, to the war or worse. Not only does he defend his own human rights, but because of his composite nature he defends the rights of all marginal men and women. In particular he struggles for the right to his past, his uncensored past: "He [Baby Villon] asks me to tell all I can remember/Of my father, his uncle."

Of course, this poem is as much about the poet himself as it is about Baby Villon. Through the encounter with his "imaginary brother," an encounter made more dramatic by its uniqueness--"We stand to end this first and last visit"--the poet undergoes a profound transformation: he is "made

otherwise by all his [Villon's] pain." In fact, Baby Villon is a reflected image of the poet himself, the victimized Jew as well as the fatherless son. In addition to the vulnerability they share as Jews, Baby Villon's desire, his need to know all he can of his dead father is Levine's need, reflected in poem after poem, to know all he can of his own father who died when Levine was five.

The poem "Baby Villon," then, records a moment in which life and myth converge--the life of the poet, the myth of Baby Villon--a moment in which Levine intuitively perceives the universality of his particular experiences as a Jew. I say intuitively because it was only some time after the publication of the poem, upon questioning by Abraham Chapman, editor of Jewish-American Literature: An Anthology, that Levine consciously recognized the essentially Jewish nature of the poem.

To him [Chapman] "Baby Villon" was a Jewish poem. I saw what he meant: it was a celebration of courage and integrity and the difficulty of life wherever it takes place.

(DA,143)

Aside from Levine's belated recognition of "Baby Villon" as a Jewish poem, we can identify traces of a Biblical story which contribute further to the Jewish nature of the poem: the enigmatic, transformative encounter on the bank of the Jabbok river between Jacob and either a man, an angel, or God (the text is ambiguous). Though Levine

certainly did not have this story in mind when composing "Baby Villon," there are several poignant parallels between the two texts. Levine describes Baby Villon, his "imaginary brother," as a "stiff," rugged fighter. Esau, Jacob's brother, a hunter, a sportsman, a fighter, is also characterized by his ruggedness. And Jacob, like the speaker of "Baby Villon," is shy and fair-skinned.

Furthermore, both Jacob and Levine are profoundly changed by their respective encounters. Though the identity of the figure with whom Jacob wrestles is ambiguous, some rabbinical interpreters have argued convincingly that the struggle occurs between two aspects of Jacob's personality, the heroic (a characteristic which prior to this event had only asserted itself in Jacob's dreams) and the mediocre, the unassuming.<sup>4</sup> At Peniel, Jacob's day-time personality defends itself victoriously; Jacob discovers the strength to behave heroically in his waking life. In "Baby Villon" Levine, too, undergoes a transformation: his fair, sheltered side is toughened through its encounter with the fighter-for-justice Villon, a representative of the heroic side of Levine's personality.

In this case, the correspondences between the two texts are probably no more than coincidental--a coincidence, however, grounded in Levine's familiarity with Hebrew scriptures. Indeed, on many other occasions Levine deliberately draws on Biblical characters and episodes to

lend mythological weight to his subjects. On the Edge, Levine's first book, is full of Biblical allusions, even if the contemporary world depicted seems at odds with the Biblical world. "Berenda Slough," for instance, is an anti-Genesis poem.<sup>5</sup> "Earth and water without form,/change, or pause: as if the third/day had not come, this calm norm/of chaos denies the Word" (OTE, 27). Thus the poem begins with a vision that seems to deny creation. But, as the poem instructs and warns us, the viewer who "denies this is creation . . . shall find nothing he can comprehend." The warning stated, the poem concludes with its apocalyptic vision: "Here the mind beholds the mind/as it shall be in the end." This vision of creation and the end of time is a particularly metaphysical one, characteristic of Levine's earliest work. Looking out on the landscape, the viewer witnesses not "stumps," "clumps," and "rushes," but a vision of his own mind.

In its use of Biblical allusions to intensify a rejected lover's despair, "Green Thumb," another poem from the first book, becomes unintentionally comic. "Shake out my pockets! Harken to the call/Of that calm voice that makes no sound at all!", the poem begins, imitating the form of a prayer (OTE, 13). But to whom is this bereaved lover calling? God? No, to the great, mysterious "Green Thumb." The poem goes on to describe the love affair at the height of its passion. "My blood was bubbling like a ten-day

stew;/It kept on telling me the thing to do./I asked, she acquiesced, and then we fell/To private Edens in the midst of hell./For forty days temptation was our meal,/The night our guide, and what we could not feel/We could not trust." In bed the couple is in Eden, though they are surrounded by hell. The affair endures, apparently, for forty days, the length of time the Israelites wandered the desert on their Exodus from Egypt, led by a pillar of fire and clouds to Mt. Sinai and the Divine revelation. But this couple will not survive until the revelation, for at the start of the next stanza we are informed, "At last we parted, she to East Moline,/I to the service of the great unseen." The speaker wanders about, lost, trying to interpret the "great unseen's" portents, until he learns, by mail, that his departed beloved is pregnant. Guilt ridden, "heartsick and tired," the poet begs for relief.

. . . to you, Green Thumb, I prayed  
 For her reprieve and that our debt be paid  
 By my remorse. "Give me a sign," I said,  
 "Give me my burning bush." You squeaked the bed.  
 I hid my face like Moses on the hill,  
 But unlike Moses did not feel my will  
 Swell with new strength; I put my choice to  
 sleep.  
 That night we cowered, choice and I, like sheep.  
 (OTE,14)

This failed Moses can attain no comfort from the traditional religious order of experience. The Biblical motif, used in this way, overwhelms the poem. The gap between the sacred and the profane is too great, creating one comic effect

after another. If Levine wants to mythologize his experience, he must find a way other than overlaying the Biblical onto the mundane.

The presence of the Biblical remains strong even in Levine's most recent work. In "A Walk with Tom Jefferson," Tom, a black man whose family moved from Alabama to Detroit, where he lives in a burned-out neighborhood growing vegetables in the least likely squares of earth, sees life around him as if it were Biblical.

A father puts down a spade, his son  
picks it up,  
"That's Biblical," he [Tom] says,  
"the son goes off,  
the father takes up the spade  
again, that's Biblical."<sup>6</sup>

Jefferson is so persistent in perceiving the Biblical resonance in the life about him that the speaker too begins to share this perception, until finally he asks, "What commandment/was broken to bring God's/wrath down on these streets,/what did we do wrong, going/about our daily lives. . . ." Here Levine speaks within a covenantal framework, as if he believes that God's wrath was brought on by some human violation of one of the commandments. He then goes on to sum up the season in nature, the season in American life. "It's Biblical, this season/of color coming to its end," Levine writes, referring at once to Autumn and the dominant racial theme of the poem. Levine has absorbed the Hebrew Bible. In the Tom Jefferson poem, the title poem

of his most recent book, Levine seems to be proclaiming that his work is Biblical, a point that most critics and reviewers of Levine have either ignored or overlooked.

The Biblical character and moment that figure most often in Levine's work is Adam and the banishment from the garden of Eden. "For Fran," one of the best poems in On the Edge, describes Levine's wife, a gardener, working "on the hard ground where Adam strayed,/Where nothing but his wants remain . . ." (OTE,19). While Fran gardens, Levine strays on the hard ground, book after book, suffering the frustration of his and his heroes's unfulfilled desires.

In "In a Vacant House," a less successful poem in which the poet in his privacy attempts to distinguish between the facts and illusions of his existence, Levine comes to the realization that "No one can begin anew/naming by turn beast, fowl,/and bush with the exact word" (OTE,20). Adam, the first poet, experienced the unique freedom to name the things of the world. All poets since Adam have had to face the challenging prospect of writing about a world in which everything has already been named. Adam was cursed with exile, the poets after Adam have been cursed with the diminished possibilities of language.

Adam is a natural character for Levine to select as his Biblical other. As Adam is cursed with toiling the earth all the days of his life, so too has Levine suffered the curse of hard labor. As Adam wanders forever in exile, so

too does Levine suffer the homelessness of exile. And as Adam names things with exact words, so too does Levine strive, though sometimes unsuccessfully, to find the exact words to describe his world. In "The Face", Levine, "[t]ired and useless," resigns himself to silence (a deadly gesture for a poet). Instead of speaking, he listens to the street cries of Barcelona "as though one word mattered more/than another in this world,/in this city, broken and stained,/which is the home of no one,/though it shouts out all/ our names" (7YFS,48-9). Levine the poet must bring himself to believe that "one word matter[s] more than another" if he is to continue writing. Levine the son of Adam knows that the post-Edenic world is not his home, despite the fact that his name is among those shouted out during roll call. When Levine does go home, as in "Coming Home, Detroit 1968," he finds his home "charred" and "boarded up" and "dirtied with words".<sup>7</sup> It is not that Eden, guarded by an angel with a flaming sword, is off limits. Eden is burned, destroyed, written.

Perhaps the most startling and revealing use of the figure of Adam appears in On the Edge.

### The Turning

Unknown faces in the street  
 And winter coming on. I  
 Stand in the last moments of  
 The city, no more a child,  
 Only a man,--one who has  
 Looked upon his own nakedness  
 Without shame, and in defeat

Has seen nothing to bless.  
 Touched once, like a plum, I turned  
 Rotten in the meat, or like  
 The plum blossom I never  
 Saw, hard at the edges, burned  
 At the first entrance of life,  
 And so endured, unreckoned,  
 Untaken, with nothing to give.  
 The first Jew was God; the second  
 Denied him; I am alive.

(OTE, 28)

Here the embodiment of the exiled Adam is complete. The shameless, defeated poet stands alone at the edge of a dying world: the city behind him is dying, fall is collapsing into winter, the promise of childhood has been replaced with the depletion of manhood.

The poem concludes by tracing the poet's lineage, a device common to the Bible (a begot b, b begot c, c begot d, and so on): "The first Jew was God; the second denied him; I am alive." It is the concluding two lines that startle. Traditionally, one does not think of the God of the Hebrew Bible as a Jew, but as the God of all humankind. Abraham is customarily considered the father of Judaism. Nor does one regard Adam as a Jew. Adam is the mythological father of all humankind. By identifying Adam as a Jew, Levine particularizes a universal character, the obverse of his customary universalization of Jewish experience. Furthermore, in aligning himself with Adam, the second Jew (according to Levine), a Jew who has denied God, Levine expresses a sharply ambivalent relation to his Jewish heritage: he is a Jew, but he rejects the central tenet of

Judaism, belief in God. Through Adam Levine locates himself at once within and without the Jewish tradition.

Not only does "The Turning" articulate Levine's divided Jewish identity, it also characterizes a poet who is in part defined by what he rejects, whose very life originates in an act of opposition: The first Jew was God; the second denied him; I am alive. To the extent that Levine stands in opposition to Judaism, he is defined by Judaism.

Similar to the way he is empowered by the Judaism he rejects, Levine paradoxically is sustained by a Bible he simultaneously embraces and rejects. This is clearly evident in "My Son and I," a poem in which Levine masterfully intertwines the Biblical with the mundane in a strikingly personal and mythological manner. "In a coffee house at 3 am/and he believes/I'm dying," the poem begins.<sup>8</sup> Levine's poems are almost never set in the middle of the day. Usually they are set at dawn, a time of hope, often false hope, or at twilight, the hour of despair. This poem, however, is set during the dead and hopeless hours of the night. The location is New York City, where "the wind/moves along the streets/. . . picking up/abandoned scraps of newspapers/and tiny messages of hope/no one hears." The efficacy of prayer is lost; written communication is cheap and readily discarded. His son is the same laborer Levine once was. The son is "dressed/in worn corduroy pants/and

shirts over shirts,/and his hands are stained/as mine once  
were/with glue, ink,paint."

Seated in the coffee house, with the fallen world about them, the son is deeply saddened by the belief that his father is dying: "For forty/minutes he's tried not/to cry." Had we not already uncovered some of the Biblical motifs underlying many of Levine's poems, we might simply dismiss the "forty minutes" as a mundane report of factual information. Indeed, there is pathos suggested in the detail, 40 minutes is a long time to hold back tears. But the number 40, as we have seen elsewhere in Levine, is Biblically resonant: 40 days the Jews wandered the desert until they reached Sinai and were blessed with divine revelation. Levine will draw on this legend later in the poem.

Faced with the loss of his father, the son is concerned with the condition of the rest of his family.

. . . How are his brothers?  
I tell him I don't know,  
they have grown away  
from me. We are Americans  
and never touch on this  
stunned earth where a boy  
sees his life fly past  
through a car window.

The sociological phenomenon of contemporary American life registered, the American myth of the automobile invoked, Levine in this passage again echoes a Biblical theme:

"stunned earth": "cursed be the ground because of you," God tells Adam in Genesis 3:17.<sup>9</sup>

And Levine continues in the Biblical spirit, telling his son about his mother.

She is deaf and works  
in the earth for days, hearing  
the dirt pray and guiding  
the worm to its feasts.

Finally the son asks the question he has been wanting to ask all along.

. . . Why  
do I have to die? Why  
do I have to sit before him  
no longer his father, only  
a man? Because the given  
must be taken, because  
we hunger before we eat,  
because each small spark  
must turn to darkness.  
As we said when we were kids  
and knew the names of everything  
. . . just because.

As Levine changes in his son's eyes from father to man, he changes in his own eyes. He seems to have outgrown Adam.

"When we were kids" we "knew the names of everything." When we were kids, Levine suggests, we were all like Adam, acquiring language and naming the world anew with each word acquired. But now Levine has entered a new stage of life, the Mosaic stage, as it were, a stage in which language fails to say what needs to be said, a stage in which he helplessly replies "just because" to his son's question.

Just as Levine finally fails to find the language to give his son a satisfactory answer, he also fails to find a blessing for his son.

. . . I reach  
across the table and take  
his left hand in mine.  
I have no blessing.

Levine would like to be able to reenact the Biblical scene, the blessing of Isaac by Abraham, and Jacob by Isaac. But, try as he might he cannot find the words. He has absorbed the Biblical vision only to realize the bankruptcy of that vision. He has learned to speak the language of the Bible only to learn that he cannot say what must be said, and so, here, as in other poems, Levine careens toward silence.

. . . I can  
tell him how I found  
the plum blossom before  
I was thirty, how once  
in a rooming house in Alicante  
a man younger than I,  
an Argentine I barely understood,  
sat by me through the night  
while my boy Teddy cried out  
for help, and how when he slept  
at last, my friend wept  
with thanks in the cold light.  
I can tell him that his hand  
sweating in mine can raise  
the Lord God of Stones,  
bring down the Republic of Lies,  
and hold a spoon. Instead  
I say it's late, and he pays

I can tell him this, I can tell him that, I can tell him the other thing, Levine tells us, as he considers moments in his

personal history as well as collective history he believes might be of importance to his son. But, defeated, the father, the poet opts for silence.

. . . Instead  
I say it's late, and he pays  
and leads me back  
through the empty streets  
to the Earl Hotel, where  
the room sours with the mould  
of old Bibles dumped down  
the air shaft.

Ah ha, we might say, Levine himself has finally freed himself from the influence of the Bible. And, in part, we would be right, since Levine spends much of his time in poems in which the Bible figures, however subtly, denying its relevance. But Levine is not yet through with the Bible.

. . . In my coat  
I stand alone in the dark  
waiting for something,  
a flash of light, a song,  
a remembered sweetness  
from all the lives I've lost.  
Next door the TV babbles  
on and on, and I give up  
and sway toward the bed  
in a last chant before dawn.

Despite his failure to find sustenance in the Bible, Levine has arrived at Sinai, awaiting revelation. The revelation, of course, does not come, and he despairs. Is his final gesture one of a man who has dumped the Bible down the air shaft for the last time? Absolutely not. It's the

traditional gesture of a praying Jew. "I . . . sway toward the bed in a last chant." At the same time he gives up, he prays, he chants his prayer, he chants his poem. This is Levine, within and without the Hebrew Biblical culture, the Jewish culture, at his best.

It is through the integration of Biblical archetypes and language with the colloquial speech patterns of an American man from Detroit that Levine transforms his personal lyric into a communal form of address. But despite his success in integrating the Biblical with the colloquial, the historical with the contemporary, the past with the present, the communal with the private, the extent of Levine's Jewish vision remains limited.

Explicit references to Jews or Jewish life can be found throughout Levine's work. In "Saturday Sweeping" (They Feed They Lion) Levine alludes to the legend of "the great talking dogs that saved the Jews," a legend, he informs us in an interview, he learned from his grandfather (DA,46); in "Uncle" (1933) he writes of an uncle who "argued the Talmud under his nails"; in "Letters for the Dead" (1933) he mentions going off to work "with bloodless [Kosher] sandwiches"; "My Name" (7 Years from Somewhere) concludes with an irreverent boy smoking a cigarette or picking his nose "just when the cantor soars before him into a heaven of meaningless words"; in "Salts and Oils," from Sweet Will, Levine alludes to the imaginary "final, unread book of the

Midrash." In short, Levine's work is salted with casual references to essentially American-Jewish cultural experience. But in proportion to the totality of Levine's work these kinds of specific Jewish references appear only infrequently and feel almost incidental to the heart of the work, as if the references themselves were thoroughly assimilated into the larger world of Levine's poetry. The image that occurs with the greatest frequency is that of the Jew as victim, the Jew as an object of discrimination. "Making Soda Pop" begins, "The big driver said/he only fucked Jews." The poem "Sweet Will" celebrates Stash, a black punch press operator who "hollered at all/of us over the oceanic roar of work,/addressing us by our names and nations--/'Nigger, Kike, Hunky, River Rat,'/but he gave it a tune, an old tune,/like 'America the Beautiful.'" As he set out to do in "Silent in America," Levine continues to celebrate the outcast, the overlooked, the discriminated against, the ignored, and without dramatizing the point he includes himself as a member of that group.

Of course, growing up as a Jew in Detroit Levine had the unfortunate opportunity to experience discrimination, anti-Semitism, first hand.

. . . Detroit was an extraordinarily anti-Semitic city. I don't know if you're aware of a man named Father Coughlin, who was on the radio every Sunday from Royal Oak, which is a suburb of Detroit. He had a huge church out there and he preached Hitler every Sunday. I spent most of my childhood and adolescence fighting with people who, you know,

wanted to beat me up because I was Jewish. I didn't enjoy it at all. Even winning wasn't very satisfying, you weren't winning anything.  
(DA, 93)

Clearly, these childhood and adolescent experiences had a profound impact on Levine, inspiring him to take up the cause of the "failed and lost, the marginal, the unloved, the unwanted," the black, the worker, the Spanish anarchist, and occasionally even the Jew, which he does either in passing references or in a more extended form, as in his poems on the Holocaust.<sup>10</sup>

His two poems on the Holocaust are "The Survivor," an elegy for a cousin, and "On A Drawing By Flavio," a poem on a drawing of the Rabbi of Auschwitz. In the latter, Levine comes to the startling recognition that he and the Rabbi portrayed in the drawing hanging over his desk are one and the same man. This is the second character from Jewish life with whom Levine strongly identifies.

"Above my desk/the Rabbi of Auschwitz/bows his head and prays/for us all," the poem begins (A, 55). It is both personal and communal: Levine confronts the image of the rabbi in the privacy of his study; at the same time he recognizes profoundly that the image he sits before is one of a man whose concern is for all humankind. Not surprisingly, God does not play a leading role in the poem. If there is a mysterious force in the world, it is centered

in nature: ". . . the earth/which long ago inhaled/his last flames turns/its face toward the light."

The arrival of dawn and the "first gray shapes" of the day cause Levine to question, as he sits before the drawing and the window.

At the cost of such  
death must I enter  
this body again,  
this body which is  
itself closing on  
death?

Again, the answer to his question comes not from God but from nature.

. . . Now the sun  
rises above a stunning  
valley, and the orchards  
thrust their burning  
branches into the day.  
Do as you please, says  
the sun without uttering  
a word.

Nature speaks, though not with a verbal language. A man divided against himself, a man torn between his moral allegiance to the Rabbi of Auschwitz and his own physical nature, Levine confesses his dilemma, he cannot do as he pleases.

. . . But I can't.  
I am this hand that  
would raise itself  
against the earth  
and I am the earth too.

It is as if Levine has identified the earth as the Rabbi's enemy, not other men. Perhaps his failure to direct his rage at the true enemies of the Rabbi and the Jews is an indication of Levine's utter despair over the moral condition of the human race; certainly the rage Levine might have directed at a God who could allow such horrors as the Holocaust to occur has been ineffectually directed toward the earth. This leads Levine to a state of paralysis, moral and physical.

I look again and closer  
at the Rabbi and at last  
see he has my face  
that opened its eyes  
so many years ago  
to death. He has these  
long tapering fingers  
that long ago reached  
for our father's hand  
long gone to dirt, these  
fingers that hold  
hand to forearm,  
forearm to hand because  
that is all that God  
gave us to hold.

This closing passage moves first from the communal vision with which the poem opens to a wholly private, personal perspective. Looking at the Rabbi, Levine is reminded of his own father and the death of his father. Whereas for Levine the tragedy of his life centers around the death of his father, the tragedy in the Rabbi's life is the death or failure of God, father of us all, as the Rabbi would see it. Finally, having personalized the Rabbi and sunk to the depth

of his own misery, Levine does redirect his anger away from earth toward God, a God who in His cruelty has given man nothing on which to depend, onto which to hold.

Considering its subject matter, this poem remains remarkably quiet, lacking the kind of moral outrage and energy of a poem such as "They Feed They Lion" or any of Levine's poems for the fallen Spanish anarchists he loves to heroize. This poem fails to sustain any real sense of moral conviction and urgency. It wavers between the personal (and at times perhaps selfish) and the communal and works itself into a state of moral paralysis, a problem which does not arise in other poems on political and moral subjects. Levine's recognition of himself in the Rabbi of Auschwitz is, finally, willed and not sincere. The Rabbi is nothing if not a man of God; Levine, a man of the earth--in this poem and others--cannot possibly have the kind of sincere identification with him that he does with Adam (a Hebrew word which translates as "earthy"), the character who denied God.

This poem provides us a sharp image of the limitations of the Jewishness of these poems. In particular, Levine cannot adequately engage the central belief of Judaism as a religion, the belief in one God. Of course, as a secular American-Jew Levine cannot be expected to write passionately about God. But when he does tackle a subject, such as the Rabbi of Auschwitz, that demands some engagement with

theological issues, Levine must be able to address God or the absence of God with a clear and forceful voice.

Instead, Levine backs away from the terrifying theological implications of the Holocaust, and speaks finally only of the local, personal loss that has troubled his days.

It would be wrong to criticize Levine harshly for failing to do something he has no intention of doing. It is not wrong, however, to note the weakening of Levine's poetry when he approaches explicitly Jewish subjects, as in the previous poem and in "Jewish Graveyards, Italy" (Sweet Will), for instance. That these graveyards are specifically Jewish is of some import to the poet--it must be or else he would not have bothered to identify them as such in the title. The poem, however, avoids exploring the subject the title's specificity suggests. For the most part, this is a nature poem, divided into three parts, under the headings of "dust," "shade" and "rain." The first section establishes the setting in language that is neither overly exciting nor engaging: "it is summer, and even before noon/the heat is rising to stun us all,/the crickets, salamanders, ants./The large, swart flies circle slowly/in air around something I can't see/and won't be waved away."<sup>11</sup> There is a hint at an encounter with the mysterious in this passage, though this subject is never fully engaged as the poem unfolds. After a fuller presentation of the locale, the speaker

finally performs his ritual, the ritual for which he has apparently come to this graveyard.

I . . . bend to the names  
and say them as slowly as I can.  
Full, majestic, vanished names  
that fill my mouth and go out  
into the densely yellowed air  
of this great valley and dissolve

Once again Levine has come to record the names of the lost, in this case presumably the names of Jewish victims and martyrs. One hopes that the poem will intensify from here, fully engaging the subject with Levine's customary visionary passion, the same which we encounter in Levine's masterful elegies, such as "To P.L., 1916-1937: a soldier of the Republic," and "On the Murder of Lieutenant Jose Del Castillo By The Falangist Bravo Martinez, July 12, 1936," as well as others. Sadly, this is not what we get, for just as soon as Levine has engaged what could have become the heart of the poem he backs away from it, returning to the rather romantic and unintentionally comic depiction of nature which dominates the second part of the poem.

In "shade," Levine again approaches what should be the true center of the poem as he identifies the grave of "Sofia Finzi Hersch, who died/in New Jersey and rests/among her Italian relatives." What are we to make of this information? Unfortunately, Levine hasn't given us a clue. Finally, in section three, "rain," Levine confesses, "whatever truth falls from the sky/as slowly as dust

settling in/morning light or cold mist rising/from a river,  
 takes the shape/I give it, and I can't give it any." The  
 poet is the shaper of truth, a Keatsian notion perhaps, but  
 here Levine is admitting to his failure in this poem:  
 neither truth nor beauty can be found here. It is not that  
 the subject has overpowered him and gotten away from him.  
 Rather, Levine has simply shied away from the true subject  
 of the poem, knowingly or unknowingly. Though "On A Drawing  
 By Flavio" fails, it approaches its subject with greater  
 courage and directness. "Jewish Graveyards, Italy"  
 dissolves into philosophical reflections on nature, missing  
 the opportunity to present an elegy for people who might  
 well fulfill Levine's requirements for heroes.

Levine's difficulty in writing strong poems on overtly  
 Jewish subjects is perhaps a reflection of his acknowledged  
 ambivalence toward his Jewish identity, an ambivalence based  
 on his rejection of God as well as his discomfort with the  
 concept of Jewish exclusivity.

I thought it [Judaism] was a religion that  
 preached exclusiveness. In every sense. I'm  
 talking about the culture more than the faith. I  
 was told that people who weren't Jewish hated me,  
 and I ought to hate them, and no matter how I  
 kidded myself sooner or later they'd get me. I  
 was supposed to be somehow superior to them either  
 because I did let them get me or I didn't--I could  
 have my choice.

(DA,142)

As a source of sympathy for other victims, national and  
 international, however, Levine's Jewishness helps him

produce inspired poetry, empowered by a deep sense of human justice and dignity. Indeed, the relatively few poems on overtly Jewish subjects may be less an indication of the minimal effect Jewishness has had on Levine's poetic vision than an indication of Levine's desire to avoid the potential charge of Jewish exclusivity. And he does avoid the charge by essentially abandoning Jewish life as subject matter and embracing in its stead the lives of other marginal characters and groups. Levine himself draws the connection between his Jewish past and his interest in the Spanish Civil War.

It began [his interest in the Spanish Civil War] because it was apparent to me . . . coming from a Jewish household, I had a very heightened sense of what fascism meant. It meant anti-Semitism; it meant Hitler. I mean he was like the king fascist. And then there were these minor league fascists, but they essentially meant the same thing. And I saw the threat reaching right into my house and snuffing me out if something wasn't done to stop the advance of fascism.

(DA,92-3)

Thus, Levine's poems on the Spanish Civil War can be regarded as a displaced or, perhaps, universalized expression of his concerns as a Jew. This alone is evidence of the extent to which Levine's Jewish past continues to influence him precisely in the ways in which he rejects that past.

"Gift for a Believer," dedicated to the artist responsible for the portrait of the Rabbi of Auschwitz, may

best exemplify the way Levine is able to incorporate powerful Jewish experience in a poem that addresses a subject which is not overtly Jewish. "Gift for a Believer" recounts a pledge not to forget atrocities perpetrated against man, by systems political or economic. And the poem records the failure to honor that pledge. But the poem, finally, does not end on a note of utter despair.

It is Friday, a usual day  
in Italy, and you wait. Below  
the street sleeps at noon.  
Once the Phoenicians came that way,  
the Roman slaves on foot,  
and later the Nazis.<sup>12</sup>

The poem moves quickly from the present to the past, the historical perspective.

. . . To you came  
the Anarchists chanting, 'We shall inherit,'  
and among them Santo Caserio  
who lost his head for knifing  
the President of France, the ambassador  
to hell.

As we have seen, Levine will not be trapped by what he perceives as the exclusivity of Judaism. Therefore, he does not express his moral outrage at crimes committed against Jews but finds a substitute, equivalent crime toward which to direct that moral outrage, which in this case is fascism and the Spanish Civil War.

. . . Came little Ferrer  
in his long gown who taught  
the Spanish children to question.

His fine hands chained behind  
his back, his eyes of a boy  
smeared, he swings above the stone trench  
of Montjuich. The wind came  
to blow his words away, then snow  
that buried your childhood  
and all the promises, that rusted  
out the old streetcars and humped  
over your fathers' graves.

Montjuich, as we learn in the poem of the same title, is translated variously as "Hill of Jews," "named for a cemetery long gone," or "Hill of Jove" (A,43). It is in that cemetery that Ferrer and other anarchists, other martyrs are buried. This is as close as Levine can come to linking the fate of the Jews with the fate of the Spanish anarchists. Consistent with Levine's other poems, this dutifully records a vision of the shattered, post-Edenic world, a world of wind that blows words away, snow that buries one's childhood and obscures the graves of one's ancestors, cutting one off from his past. Each time a hopeful vision is offered, it is immediately shattered.

In your vision Durruti whispered  
to an old woman that he would  
never forget the sons and daughters  
who died believing they carried  
a new world there in their hearts,  
but when the doctor was summoned  
and could not stop his wounds  
he forgot. Ascaso, who fled  
with him to Argentina, Paraguay,  
Bruxelles, the first to die  
storming the Atarazanas Barracks,  
he forgot. The railyards of Leon  
where his father doubled over  
and deafened, forgotten. That world  
that he said is growing here

in my heart this minute  
forgotten. (NOTL,39)

Clearly, Levine, by writing this poem, is resisting the pressures of an unjust world that caused Durruti to forget his visions for a just society, though Levine himself records with regret his own failure to remember tragedies witnessed in the workplace.

. . . When old Nathan Pine  
gave two hands to a drop-forge  
at Chevy, my spit turned to gall  
and I swore I'd never forget.  
When the years turned to a gray mist  
and my sons grew away without faith,  
the memory slept, and I bowed  
my head so that I might live.

Resigned, humbled by the destructive forces of the world around him, Levine again adopts the pose of a penitent, the pose of prayer, and then turns to a passage resonant with Biblical overtones.

On the spare hillsides west  
of here the new lambs stumble  
in the fog and rise. My wife kneels  
to the cold earth and we have bread.

All the basic Biblical (pastoral, as well) ingredients are present: lambs, earth, bread, etc. But as elsewhere in Levine's work, the promise of return to a Biblically centered world affords no comfort.

I see and don't believe. Farther  
west the ocean breaks  
on cold stones, the great Pacific

that blesses no one breaks  
 into water. So this is what  
 I send you, friend, where you wait  
 above a street that will waken  
 into dark shops, sellers of flour  
 and onions, dogs, hawkers  
 of salt, iron, lies. I send  
 water to fill your glass  
 and overflow, to cool your wrists  
 in the night ahead, water  
 that runs like a pure thread  
 through all my dreams  
 and empties into tears, water  
 to wash our eyes, our mother's last wine,  
 two palm-fulls the sky gave us,  
 what the roots crave, rain.

In this exalted, visionary conclusion, Levine is able, momentarily, to overcome his despair, to identify at least one pure thing in the world, water. He is able to cry and to be nourished and to offer a gift, from a non-believer who has not yet given up on the world to a believer who has not given up yet either.

This poem modulates perfectly between a private voice--the voice that remembers Nathan Pine, the voice that dedicates the poem to a friend--and a public voice--the voice of history, the voice of the Bible. The poem brilliantly offers its gift, a bridge that joins believer to non-believer, Jewish historical experience to non-Jewish historical experience, the personal to the universal. Levine's despair, finally, is a representative despair, Levine's modest hope is our hope as well.

Indeed, when Levine attempts to write a poem about an explicitly Jewish subject his power is diminished. When he

flavors his poems with images collected from Jewish cultural life, the images come closer to cliche than to anything authentic, original, true. But when Levine applies the sense of social justice, which he himself understands as having derived from his experiences as a young Jew growing up in Detroit, to atrocities beyond the circumscribed pale of Jewish life, Levine is able to write with absolute power and conviction, he is able to pour his Jewish and Biblical sensibility into his language, he is able to write unforgettably rich poems that may not speak exclusively to Jews, but that do speak to the Jew in each of us.

#### Notes

1. Philip Levine, 7 Years from Somewhere (New York: Atheneum, 1980).
2. Philip Levine, Not This Pig (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1968), p. 48.
3. Philip Levine, Don't Ask (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1981), p. 143.
4. Elie Wiesel, Messengers of God: Biblical Portraits and Legends (New York: Summit Books, 1976), pp. 123-124.
5. Philip Levine, On the Edge (Iowa City: The Stone Wall Press, 1961).
6. Philip Levine, "A Walk with Tom Jefferson," in A Walk With Tom Jefferson (New York: Knopf, 1988), p. 57.
7. Philip Levine, They Feed They Lion (New York: Atheneum, 1972), p. 21.
8. Philip Levine, The Names of the Lost (New York: Atheneum, 1976), p. 46.

9. Tanakh: A New Translation of The Holy Scriptures According to the Traditional Hebrew Text, (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 5746/1985), p. 7.
10. Edward Hirsch, "Naming the Lost: Absence, Anger and Redemption in the Poetry of Philip Levine," unpublished paper delivered at the Modern Language Association Annual Convention, December 29, 1987, cited with the permission of the author.
11. Philip Levine, Sweet Will (New York: Atheneum, 1985), p. 53.
12. Philip Levine, The Names of the Lost (New York: Atheneum, 1976), p. 38.

## CHAPTER 5 TOWARD AN AMERICAN-JEWISH POETRY

Most American-Jewish poets do not write within a framework that would be considered Jewish according to the standards of normative rabbinical Jewry. Of course, most American Jews do not conduct their lives in accordance with halakha, the code of conduct that reflects the standards of rabbinical Jewry. Indeed, most American Jews remain wholly ignorant of halakha. Consequently, the failure, as critics like Bloom would have it, of American-Jewish poetry to reflect rabbinic norms is simply an accurate indication of the state of American Jewry. A thriving secular American Jewry spawns secular American-Jewish poetry, poetry that to some readers appears more American than Jewish.

American-Jewish poets often question American values (and thereby American-Jewish values), but rarely do they directly challenge particularly Jewish beliefs in their poetry. (A rejection of a belief in God, the central Jewish belief, is taken for granted by most twentieth-century American-Jewish poets; consequently, they feel no need to

defend their disbelief.) This fact alone may be sufficient evidence to substantiate the opinions of some readers that American-Jewish poets remain, finally, uninterested in Jewish life. But, as John Hollander has suggested in his brilliant essay "The Question of American Jewish Poetry" (the best essay on the subject to date), the apparent lack of interest in Jewishness as a subject may be illusory.

It may be . . . that an American Jewish poet has to spend years becoming an American poet and learning what that can mean before being able, perhaps, to cope poetically with his or her own Jewishness, however problematic a notion that might be. This uncertain venture may even give the appearance of wandering away from Jewish identity--at least, as other people construe it--when for the poet it is evidence of just the opposite.<sup>1</sup>

To date few American-Jewish poets have chosen "to cope poetically" in any direct manner with their Jewishness. As we have seen, Jewish life inevitably and continually influences the poetry of Shapiro, Levine and Ignatow, though rarely is it a subject with which the poets consciously wrestle.

That many American-Jewish poets of the second (Shapiro and Ignatow, for instance) and third (Levine) periods have chosen not to write on the subject of the Jew, or when they do, write in a manner that suggests the universality of Jewish experience, in part reflects an implicit rejection of Jewish exclusivity, a belief central to normative rabbinic Jewry that has troubled many twentieth-century American

Jews.<sup>2</sup> Shapiro's insistence on portraying the Jew as a representative, universal man--"The Jew represents the primitive ego of the race," he writes in the introduction to Poems of a Jew--is but one way of transcending Jewish exclusivity. Ignatow and Levine are more direct in their prose statements decrying the belief, and their poems are practical expressions of men who will not promote the divisive notion of chosenness.

Furthermore, many of the American-Jewish poets of the second and third periods may have experienced an unarticulated fear that poetry which was too overtly Jewish would be dismissed as parochial in its concerns and rejected by a literary community that remained in a fundamental, unexamined way suspicious of the Jew. To avoid rejection by the dominant Gentile poetry community then, they chose to write as Americans, not Jews. Thus the apparent swerve from Jewishness as a subject, as Hollander suggests, paradoxically reflects the denial of and admission to Jewish identity in that the poems of many American-Jewish poets represent at once assimilation, the rejection of normative rabbinic Jewry, and protection against latent anti-Semitism.

Hollander speculates that in the course of an individual American-Jewish poet's life he may first master the language of American poetry and then waken to the prospect of developing the language of American-Jewish poetry. I would like to suggest that this individualistic

process has a historical counterpart. As this historical process has unfolded, American-Jewish poets of the second and third periods have dedicated most of their careers to mastering American and English poetic traditions. It will be the poets of the fourth and fifth periods who will most aggressively pursue the direct articulation of Jewish identity in their poetry.

Among the younger poets who have begun to explore Jewish identity in their poems are Robert Pinsky, Alan Shapiro, Jane Shore and Judith Baumel. Naturally, these poets address what have become some of the conventional Jewish subjects in American-Jewish poetry. Alan Shapiro writes of Jewish/Christian tensions in "A Christmas Story," in which the speaker expresses "a vague desire/to make amends, to glorify the baby Jesus/with my friend Charlie (who said the Jews had killed him)."<sup>3</sup> Jane Shore's "High Holy Days" concludes with the speaker leaving synagogue, "spat like Jonah from the whale/back into the Jew-hating world."<sup>4</sup> Pinsky's poems on Jewish subjects are among the most innovative of those being written by younger poets. He has experimented with integrating translated passages of Jewish prayers into typically modern, discontinuous lyric poems, as in this passage from his poem "Memoir."

. . . we sealed [the words of the Shma, a Jewish prayer] in wooden boxes bound  
 In leather and threaded the boxes  
 On black leather thongs and bound the thongs  
 With the sealed words in appointed places  
 Around our heads and arms.  
 It was like saying: I am this, and not that.

And you shall teach these words  
 To your children, boxes  
 Bound at the heart and the eyes,  
 And you shall speak of them when you sit  
 Inside your houses and when you stand  
 Speaking in the marketplace, and bound  
 In your heart entirely when you walk the avenues  
 And when you go to bed  
 And when you arise.

Tin canisters of money, tumblers  
 Of memorial wax.  
 Necktie of Poland, shirt of grief. Chickpeas  
 And Seagram's whiskey, blessings of mousefur  
 lapels.  
 That, and not this.<sup>5</sup>

Here Pinsky weaves together passages from a prayer ("you shall teach these words/To your children"; "And you shall speak of them when you sit/Inside your houses," etc.), a description of the tfilin, the ritual object worn while reciting this prayer in the morning ("boxes/Bound at the heart and the eyes"), and fragmented descriptions of other details from eastern European life. Unlike some other American-Jewish poets, Pinsky's knowledge of Jewish life extends beyond the cultural. More important to the poetry, he imaginatively incorporates various dimensions of Jewish life into his poems.

To their advantage, the younger poets have at least two generations of American-Jewish poets to look back to. While

they may not find strongly identified Jewish voices among that crowd, they will be relieved to learn that Jewishness in fact has not been a handicap to American-Jewish poets. Perhaps 25% or more of important American poets over the last four decades have been Jewish. Hollander observes, "It may be that historians some years hence will look back on the last thirty-five years as a time in which Jewish American poetry flourished exceptionally" (H,33). Naive optimist that I am, I would amend this slightly to say that over the last thirty-five years Jewish American poetry began to flourish and that over the next thirty-five years it should begin to bear fruit.

Of course, before there can be a strong Jewish voice in American poetry American-Jewish poets on the whole must increase their knowledge of Jewish life. Many of the poets of the second and third periods could be characterized as Jews primarily because of the mysterious fact of Jewishness by birth. Jews by birth abandon conscious interest in their Jewishness, for all intents and purposes, early in their lives, though even by that point they have likely absorbed enough experiences to be significantly influenced by their culturally Jewish past throughout their lives. We have seen strong evidence of this in the works of Shapiro, Ignatow and Levine.

Of the three poets we have studied, Levine belongs most securely to the category of Jew by birth. Though Ignatow's

active interest in his Jewish heritage subsided at a fairly early age, his childhood Jewish education as he describes it was conventional. Thus, Ignatow certainly must be considered more than a Jew by birth, though he is not a Jew who pursues Jewish life in any conscious or deliberate way throughout his adulthood. Shapiro belongs more or less to the same category as Ignatow, though of the three it is Shapiro who in his adulthood reflects most seriously on his Jewishness.

None of the three, finally, belong to the category of Jews who choose to develop substantially their Jewish knowledge throughout their adult years; none are among those Jews who deliberately and consciously select the Jewish grid as that by which to understand the world. Shapiro, of course, did choose to emphasize the Jewish consciousness articulated in his poetry, though only for a brief period in the midst of a 50 year career. "When the Jews are not in trouble I forget about the whole thing," Shapiro observed in 1979 with regards to his interest in the Jewish situation.<sup>6</sup> American-Jewish poets who choose to probe and nurture their Jewishness through education and commitment to a Jewish lifestyle, be it religious or secular, stand the greatest chance of writing a truly distinctive American-Jewish poetry. Indeed, one hopes that a few younger American-Jewish poets, inspired by a full knowledge of Jewish life--historical, spiritual, cultural--will possess talents great

enough to shape their inspirations, their Jewish inspirations, into powerful and enduring poems that will contribute to the unfolding story of humankind.

#### Notes

1. John Hollander, "On the Question of American Jewish Poetry," in Tikkun, 3, No. 3 (1988), p. 114.
2. In the introduction to Apocalyptic Messianism and Contemporary Jewish-American Poetry (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986), pp. 2-7, R. Barbara Gitenstein distinguishes three periods of Jewish-American poetry: (1) nineteenth-century poets such as Penina Moise and Emma Lazarus; (2) modernists and what she calls experimentalists such as Charles Reznikoff, Louis Zukovsky, Karl Shapiro, and Delmore Schwartz; and (3) contemporary American poets such as John Hollander, Irving Feldman, Robert Mezey and Anthony Hecht.
3. Alan Shapiro, "A Christmas Story," in Happy Hour (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987), p. 31.
4. Jane Shore, "High Holy Days," in The Minute Hand (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1987), p. 23.
5. Robert Pinsky, "Memoir," in The American Poetry Review, 16, No. 5 (September/October 1987), p. 7.
6. Lee Bartlett, Karl Shapiro: A Descriptive Bibliography: 1933-1977 (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1979), pp. 26-7.

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#### BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Richard Chess received his B.A. in communications from Glassboro State College in 1976. Following that, he traveled to Israel where he spent a year in Safed as a volunteer in the Sherut La'am Program, working as an educational media specialist, and two years in Jerusalem as the assistant director of the Jewish Agency's educational media production and training center. In 1984 he received an M.A. in English from the University of Florida. His poems have been published or are forthcoming in The Missouri Review, New England Review/Bread Loaf Quarterly, Shenandoah, The Beloit Poetry Journal, Orim: A Jewish Journal from Yale, and Shirim. In 1988 he received honorable mention in the B'nai B'rith Hillel National Poetry Writing Contest.

I certify that I have read this study and that in my opinion it conforms to acceptable standards of scholarly presentation and is fully adequate, in scope and quality, as a dissertation for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

Donald Justice

Donald Justice, Chairman  
Professor of English

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R. Brandon Kershner

R. Brandon Kershner  
Associate Professor of English

I certify that I have read this study and that in my opinion it conforms to acceptable standards of scholarly presentation and is fully adequate, in scope and quality, as a dissertation for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

Andrew Gordon

Andrew Gordon  
Associate Professor of English

I certify that I have read this study and that in my opinion it conforms to acceptable standards of scholarly presentation and is fully adequate, in scope and quality, as a dissertation for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

Warren Bargad

Warren Bargad  
Associate Professor of English

I certify that I have read this study and that in my opinion it conforms to acceptable standards of scholarly presentation and is fully adequate, in scope and quality, as a dissertation for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

Sheldon R. Isenberg

Sheldon R. Isenberg  
Associate Professor of Religion

This dissertation was submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the Department of English in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences and to the Graduate School and was accepted as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

August 1988

Dean, Graduate School

UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA



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